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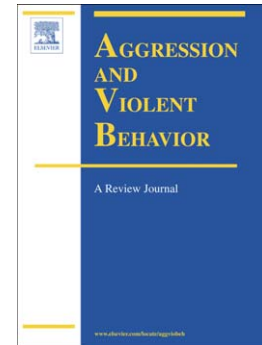
Criminal Behavior and the Copycat Effect: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework for Empirical Investigation

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Criminal Behavior and the Copycat Effect:

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework for Empirical Investigation

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## Abstract

The accumulation of anecdotal accounts of copycat crime suggests that popular culture plays an important role in some instances and aspects of criminal behavior. However, there is little empirical research specifically examining the copycat effect on criminal behavior. Questions remain regarding the nature and extent of copycat crime, cultural influences that shape the copycat effect, the role and relevance of popular culture as a motivating factor for criminal behavior, and issues the copycat phenomenon raises for legal determinations of criminal responsibility. This paper reviews the research literature and contemporary case examples of copycat crime with attention to the influence of mass media technology on criminal behavior, the mechanisms of media-mediated crime, and the relevance of understanding the copycat phenomenon for determinations of criminal responsibility in insanity cases. An integrative theoretical model of copycat crime is proposed, a methodological framework for empirically investigating copycat crime is presented, and practical implications for understanding the role of the copycat effect on criminal behavior are discussed.

Criminal Behavior and the Copycat Effect:  
Literature Review and Theoretical Framework for Empirical Investigation

*“Life is like a video game. Everybody’s got to die sometime.”*

-- 18-year-old Devin Moore, to police after he was  
apprehended for fatally gunning down two police  
officers and an emergency dispatcher.

In 2003, 18-year-old Devin Moore was arrested for suspicion of auto theft in Fayette, Alabama. Moore, who had no prior criminal history, was cooperative with police when they brought him to police station. Once inside the station and booked, Moore grabbed a .40-caliber Glock automatic from a police officer, shot the officer twice, and then shot and killed a second officer and an emergency dispatcher. After the murders, Moore grabbed police car keys, walked out the front door, and drove off in a police cruiser. All three victims – two officers and a dispatcher were shot in the head and pronounced dead at the scene. Moore was captured shortly after (“Can a video game lead to murder,” March 6, 2005). Following his capture, Moore’s told police that he had been playing the video game *Grand Theft Auto (GTA) – Vice City* for hours on end prior to the murders. Later at trial, it was revealed that he was a compulsive violent video game player who suffered from childhood abuse-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Moore’s defense attorney’s argued the “GTA defense” -- that he was not guilty by reason of insanity and that he had lost touch with reality and was acting out in real-life the virtual violence in *Grand Theft Auto*. Despite his attorney’s efforts, the GTA defense was unsuccessful and Moore was convicted on August 10, 2005 of capital murder and sentenced to death (Adams, 2005; Farrell, 2005).

There is a large body of research on the effects of violent media on aggressive behavior that suggests that viewing violent media has an imitative influence on aggressive behavior (Anderson et al, 2003; Loyd, 2002; Oliver, 2002; Sparks & Sparks, 2002, Surette, 2002, 2013) and the effects of media violence exposure may be underestimated (Gentile & Bushman, 2012). Most people consume violent media every day and do not mimic the violent media images they see. However, anecdotal evidence reveals that, for some individuals, violent media plays a key role in the criminal behavior they engage in (Black, 1990; Coleman, 2004; Surette, 1990, Surette, 1998). Exposure to violent media has also been

found to contribute to the development of the “mean world syndrome” – a view of the world as more hostile and dangerous than it actually is (Gerbner, 1994), violent masculinity as a cultural norm (Jhally, 1999; Katz, 2006), and even relatively benign forms of news media coverage on firearm legislation has been associated with increased firearm suicides by adolescence (Niederkrötenhaler et al., 2009).

The term “copycat crime” has been used in popular discourse and academic literature to refer to imitative crime influenced by media. Copycat crime is crime inspired by another crime that has been publicized in the news media or fictionally or artistically represented whereby the offender incorporates aspects of the original offense into a new crime (Helfgott, 2008). Research suggests that copycat crime is a common part of offender criminal histories with approximately 25% offenders reporting that media or popular culture played some role in their crimes (Surette, 2012, 2013). However, researchers have not been able to isolate a single stimulus like playing a violent video game as a causative factor for crime and violence amidst the many influences and risk factors that contribute to criminal behavior and some contend that it is virtually impossible to do so. While continuous playing of a violent video game can be seen as one of many risk factors that shape behavior, millions of people play violent video games and do not “copycat” virtual antisocial behaviors they see on their screens. People are differentially impacted by all sorts of cultural artifacts – books, films, TV shows, commercials, video games, etc. – and many people are positively rather than negatively impacted and alter their behavior in a positive way in response to the media they consume.<sup>1</sup> These issues make the media and technology-mediated crime difficult to empirically study and causation virtually impossible to establish. Atkinson (1999, ¶7) suggests that “the precise psychological role media played [in documented media-mediated crimes] is never clear – nor can it be, until we are able to “map a brain like a computer hard drive” (Atkinson, 1999, ¶7).

We may not yet be able to “map a brain like a computer hard drive,” but integrating criminological theory with research in cognitive psychology on the relationship between cognitive scripts and behavior can help explain the process by which chronic exposure to a game like GTA can influence behavior. When an individual engages in criminal (or any) behavior, he/she does so within the framework of a socio-cultural context and a cognitive script that is dictated by and inhabited with whatever populates

that context. Cognitive scripts are cultural products -- “simple, well-structured sequence of events – in a specified order – that are associated with a highly familiar activity” (Matlin, 2005, p. 275). Once scripts are learned (often on an automatic, non-conscious level), they serve as guides or tools for future behavior, and repeated priming and use of a set of schemas eventually makes them chronically accessible (Anderson, et al., 2003). Aspects of events, experiences, and event sequences become the content of a broader cognitive schema that are encoded in memory and that provide the basis for attributions, judgments, and behavioral decisions. People are often influenced as much by artistic, media, and pop cultural representations as they are by personal experiences. What you know comes from, “all the events you didn’t witness but believe occurred, all the facts about the world you didn’t personally collect but believe to be true, and all the things you believe to exist but haven’t personally seen” (Surette, 1998, p. xvi).”

An illustrative and recent example of a cultural script that made its way into the fantasy life and violent behavior an extreme fashion is the recent case of Elliot Rodger the perpetrator of the University of California, Santa Barbara mass shooting on May 23, 2014. Rodger killed six university students before committing suicide in a murder rampage. After the incident it was quickly discovered that Rodger had written a 141- page manifesto entitled “My Twisted Life” (Rodger, n.d.) (in which he offered a detailed account of his life in journal-form in subsections from age 0-5 to age 22) and had uploaded multiple videos, including his final video titled “Retribution” to YouTube and Google+ in which he narrated his social isolation, his misfortune at being a 22-year-old virgin, and contempt for “sorority girls” who were “stuck-up blonde sluts” and the “sexually active men” who were able to have sex with them (Helfgott, June 8, 2014. In his final account of his 22<sup>nd</sup> year and epilogue to his manifesto Rodger concluded:

...The Day of Retribution is all I have. It is the final solution to all of the injustices of this twisted world. By doing this, I will set right all of the wrongs I’ve had to face in my sorry excuse of a life.

Every single time I’ve seen a guy walk around with his beautiful girlfriend, I’ve always wanted to kill them both in the most painful way possible. They deserve it. They must be punished. The males deserve to be punished for living a better and more pleasurable life than me, and the females deserve to be punished for giving that pleasurable life to those males instead of me. On the Day of Retribution, I will finally be able to punish them ALL.

When I think about the amazing and blissful life I could have lived if only females were sexually attracted to me, my entire being burns with hatred. They denied me a happy life, and in return I will take away all of their lives. It is only fair.

I am not part of the human race. Humanity has rejected me. The females of the human species have never wanted to mate with me, so how could I possibly consider myself part of humanity? Humanity has never accepted me among them, and now I know why. I am more than human. I am superior to them all. I am Elliot Rodger... Magnificent, glorious, supreme, eminent... Divine! I am the closest thing there is to a living god. Humanity is a disgusting, depraved, and evil species. It is my purpose to punish them all. I will purify the world of everything that is wrong with it. On the Day of Retribution, I will truly be a powerful god, punishing everyone I deem to be impure and depraved....

And that is how my tragic life ends. Who would have thought my life will turn out this way? I didn't....

Not only did I have to waste my entire youth suffering in loneliness and unfulfilled desire, but I had to live with the knowledge that other boys my age were able to have all of the experiences I craved for. It is absolutely unfair and unjust. In addition, I had to suffer the shame of other boys respecting me less because I didn't get any girls. Everyone knew I was a virgin. Everyone knew how undesirable I was to girls, and I hated everyone just for knowing it. I want people to think that girls adore me. I want to feel worthy. There is no pride in living as a lonely, unwanted outcast. I wouldn't even call it living.

I am not meant to live such a pathetic, miserable life. That is not my place in this world. I will not bow down and accept such a horrific fate. If humanity will not give me a worthy place among them, then I will destroy them all. I am better than all of them. I am a god. Exacting my Retribution is my way of proving my true worth to the world....

Sex is by far the most evil concept in existence...

The ultimate evil behind sexuality is the human female. They are the main instigators of sex. They control which men get it and which men don't. Women are flawed creatures, and my mistreatment at their hands has made me realize this sad truth. There is something very twisted and wrong with the way their brains are wired. They think like beasts, and in truth, they are beasts. Women are incapable of having morals or thinking rationally. They are completely controlled by their depraved emotions and vile sexual impulses. Because of this, the men who do get to experience the pleasures of sex and the privilege of breeding are the men who women are sexually attracted to... the stupid, degenerate, obnoxious men. I have observed this all my life. The most beautiful of women choose to mate with the most brutal of men, instead of magnificent gentlemen like myself.

Women should not have the right to choose who to mate and breed with. That decision should be made for them by rational men of intelligence. If women continue to have rights, they will only hinder the advancement of the human race by breeding with degenerate men and creating stupid, degenerate offspring. This will cause humanity to become even more depraved with each generation. Women have more power in human society than they deserve, all because of sex. There is no creature more evil and depraved than the human female.

Women are like a plague. They don't deserve to have any rights.... Women are vicious, evil, barbaric animals, and they need to be treated as such.

In fully realizing these truths about the world, I have created the ultimate and perfect ideology of how a fair and pure world would work. In an ideal world, sexuality would not exist. It must be outlawed. In a world without sex, humanity will be pure and civilized....

In order to completely abolish sex, women themselves would have to be abolished. All women must be quarantined like the plague they are, so that they can be used in a manner that actually benefits a civilized society. In order carry this out, there must exist a new and powerful type of government, under the control of one divine ruler, such as myself...

The first strike against women will be to quarantine all of them in concentration camps. At these camps, the vast majority of the female population will be deliberately starved to death. That would be an efficient and fitting way to kill them all off. I would take great pleasure and satisfaction in condemning every single woman on earth to starve to death. I would have an enormous tower built just for myself, where I can oversee the entire concentration camp and gleefully watch them all die. If I can't have them, no one will, I'd imagine thinking to myself as I oversee this. Women represent everything that is unfair with this world, and in order to make the world a fair place, they must all be eradicated... A few women would be spared, however, for the sake of reproduction. These women would be kept and bred in secret labs. There, they will be artificially inseminated with sperm samples in order to produce offspring. Their depraved nature will slowly be bred out of them in time.

Future generations of men would be oblivious to these remaining women's existence, and that is for the best. If a man grows up without knowing of the existence of women, there will be no desire for sex. Sexuality will completely cease to exist. Love will cease to exist. There will no longer be any imprint of such concepts in the human psyche. It is the only way to purify the world... It is such a shameful pity that my ideal world cannot be created. ...Such a thing will never become a reality for me, but it did give me something to fantasize about as I burned with hatred towards all women for rejecting me throughout the years. This whole viewpoint and ideology of abolishing sex stems from being deprived of it all my life. If I cannot have it, I will do everything I can to DESTROY IT.

My orchestration of the Day of Retribution is my attempt to do everything, in my power, to destroy everything I cannot have. All of those beautiful girls I've desired so much in my life, but can never have because they despise and loathe me, I will destroy. All of those popular people who live hedonistic lives of pleasure, I will destroy, because they never accepted me as one of them. I will kill them all and make them suffer, just as they have made me suffer. It is only fair...

... All I ever wanted was to love women, and in turn to be loved by them back. Their behavior towards me has only earned my hatred, and rightfully so! I am the true victim in all of this. I am the good guy. Humanity struck at me first by condemning me to experience so much suffering. I didn't ask for this. I didn't want this. I didn't start this war... I wasn't the one who struck first... But I will finish it by striking back. I will punish everyone. And it will be beautiful. Finally, at long last, I can show the world my true worth (Rodger, n.d., pp. 135-136).

Rodger's manifesto, his "Retribution" video, and other videos he posted prior to acting out his fantasy exemplify culturally reinforced cognitive script and an example of what Ellison (2012) refers to as "social-cognitive observational theory gone awry" (p. 523) whereby this young man's internalization of cultural values (e.g., sex as power, virginity as a social stigma), normalization of violence as a way to solve problems, and his use of devaluation, victim stance, and omnipotence to cognitively neutralize his



behavior fueled his fantasy and converged with a long history of mental health issues ultimately culminating in extreme homicidal behavior.

Children learn complex social scripts (e.g., rules on how to interpret, understand, and handle situations) and schemas (e.g., beliefs, attitudes) from role models they see around them. Parents, teachers, peers, fairy tales, toys, books, songs, magazines, billboards, TV shows, films, video games, etc. -- help teach the scripts a person is expected to follow in any given culture. Adolescents have “a limited repertoire of ‘cultural scripts’ or ‘strategies of action’ that they can draw on to resolve their social problems” (Newman et al., 2004, p. 148). Criminal behavior is the complex product of the convergence of biological, psychological, sociological, routine activity/opportunity, phenomenological, and cultural factors at a particular time and place for a specific individual (Helfgott, 2008). Different people are more/less influenced by different factors and forces. Youth (and adult media junkies) tend to be more influenced by pop culture, are more technology savvy, and more likely to weave information from media sources than older people. Children and adolescents largely rely on symbolic reality they draw from popular culture in the formation of their cognitive scripts.

The term copycat crime has been used more heavily in popular discourse than it has in the academic literature. There has been very minimal empirical research specifically examining the copycat effect on criminal behavior though literature on conceptually relevant areas has grown considerably over the past several decades. Questions remain regarding the nature and extent of copycat crime, cultural influences that shape the copycat effect, the role and relevance of popular culture as a motivating factor for criminal behavior, and issues the copycat phenomenon raises for legal determinations of criminal responsibility. This paper reviews the research literature and contemporary case examples of copycat crime with attention to the influence of mass media technology on criminal behavior, the mechanisms of media-mediated crime, and the relevance of understanding the copycat phenomenon for determinations of criminal responsibility in insanity cases. Development of an empirical framework for examining copycat crime requires interdisciplinary synthesis of work that has been done in multiple disciplines including drawing from research on media effects (Bryant & Zillman, 2002), the Cultural Indicators Project

(Gerbner, 1994), cultural criminology (Ferrell, 1999; Ferrell & Hamm, 1998), the copycat effect (Coleman, 2002; Surette, 1998, 2002, 2013) the aesthetics of crime (Black, 1990), celebrity obsession (Harvey, 2002, video game violence (Anderson, et al, 2000, 2001, 2003), gender, violence, and media (Jhally, 1999; Katz, 2006), and violent film analysis (Newman, 1998; Manning, 1998; Shafer, 2009). An integrative theoretical model of copycat crime is proposed, a methodological framework for empirically investigating copycat crime is presented, and practical implications for understanding the role of the copycat effect on criminal behavior are discussed.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Technology-Related Risk Factors for Criminal Behavior**

“Technology changes everything, crime included” (Clark, 2004). With every technological advance, the potential emerges for criminal behavior to change. Mass media technology plays a powerful role for most people in the development of cognitive and behavioral scripts (Larson, 2003). Popular culture, television, and film are contemporary forms of myth (Hill, 1992) where stories about good/evil, right/wrong, love/hate are told on movie screens or computer monitors by strangers rather than around campfires by elders. With the pace at which mass media technology is advancing, and unprecedented exposure to and influence of media, it is increasingly important to examine the unique role that technology-related factors play in motivating and shaping criminal behavior. Criminological theory and research in the 21st century has to be concerned with the ways in which cultural technological changes influence criminal behavior. Children and adolescents today develop in an environment saturated with digital technology and mass media imagery. The forms and amount of media violence in the United States are particularly extreme relative to other countries and American children receive mixed messages about the meaning of violence (e.g., parents tell kids they cannot play violent video games and then watch the evening news filled with stories about war) (Wooden & Blazak, 2001). As technologies become more relevant to targeted audience members, more dominant as an information source, and more entertaining, it is more probable that adolescents will use this information as a tool to understand themselves and others (Lloyd, 2002). It could be argued that the convergence of culture and technology has created a

criminogenically lethal set of pop cultural artifacts that has the potential to motivate and/or lay the blueprint for criminal behavior in ways the world has never seen before. On the other hand, there are potentially prosocial and crime prevention consequences that come from mass media technology such as America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response (*AMBER*) Alert (Zgoba, 2004) and *America's Most Wanted* (White, 1989).<sup>2</sup>

Technology, media, and popular culture shape offender choices in unique ways – from the decision to commit a crime, the type of crime, and/or the manner in which it is committed to providing a ready-made script for rationalization techniques to neutralize offense behavior. Technology breeds false familiarity, blurs fantasy and reality, and provides a virtual realm that mediates conscience with important implications for the study of criminal behavior (Helfgott, 2008). Technological advances have all but guaranteed that the boundary between an event and media representation of an event has:

... increasingly become a dotted line through which the real and the simulated share a mass bank of visual references. Within this complex matrix of narrative/visual relationships, images are hyper - and often confused with one another – and in the mass replication of visual texts, the electronic representation of an event often becomes embedded within the event itself ... the large-scale dissemination of electronic images leads to a saturated state of hyperconsciousness in which real and simulated events are increasingly determined/defined in mimetic relation to each other (Tietchen, 1998, ¶17).

Computer technology has enhanced mass communication beyond anything imaginable just 30 years ago. Offenders have become more sophisticated in their modus operandi (M.O.) behavior in an effort to stay one step ahead of law enforcement technology. Social media has transformed the nature of some types of offenses such as mass shootings where offenders utilize media to both inform and display the motivations for their crimes (Helfgott, 2014; O'Toole, 2014; Sickles, 2014). Complex influences of technology and culture converge in cases where offenders are inspired by hi-tech images of crime and violence that blur the line between fantasy and reality, enjoy hearing their crimes disseminated via the news media immediately and globally, use the news media to communicate with police, avoid detection by logging onto the Internet to learn about the latest forensic techniques, and become better at what they do out of necessity to stay one step ahead of law enforcement and investigative technology (Helfgott, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

### **The Criminogenic Effects of Mass Culture and Media Violence**

Minimal empirical evidence exists to explain the complex ways in which technology, media, and popular culture influence criminal behavior on an individual level. Most researchers agree that mass media technology presents special challenges for criminology because of its powerful influence on behavior. The imitative effects of violent mass media may be much stronger than a story about violence in a book or presented in narrative form from person to person. Surette (1990) suggests that the electronic media presents greater concerns than print media because there is a larger at-risk pool of individuals who can be criminally influenced. Similarly, Black (1990) argues that the dramatic rise in the number of political assassinations in the 1960s and 1970s and other senseless murders attributed to mental illness in the 1980s are attributed to the cultural impact of television and must be understood within the “historically unprecedented context of hyperaestheticized mass-culture” (p. 136). Determining whether or not a violent computer game or movie contributed to a particular criminal act is less a question of whether or not technology or a particular media form causes the behavior than it is a question of how the influence motivates and shapes the behavior in a particular individual:

It is not simply that the mass media report in certain ways on criminal events or provide fashionable fodder out of which criminal subcultures construct collective styles. For good or bad, postmodern society exists well beyond such discrete, linear patterns of action and reaction. Rather it is that criminal events, identities, and styles take life within a media-saturated environment, and thus exist from the start as moments in a mediated spiral of presentation and representation (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995, p. 14).

Exploration of how technology serves as a motivational force for criminal behavior requires interdisciplinary analysis of the socializing properties of technology, media, and popular culture.

According to Lloyd (2002):

Mass communications, particularly the Internet and television programming, including music videos, can be reconceptualized as opportunities for adolescents to identify cues for social behavior among their peer group as well as cognitively rehearse their own approaches to certain interactions .... Without appreciation for the specific ‘cultural competencies’ of the adolescent culture, mass media influences are likely to be overlooked as a significant socialization agent for this population in the new millennium (p. 88).

This is even more important to consider in light of findings reported by Anderson et al. (2003), from three nationally representative surveys<sup>2</sup> and other studies that have found that virtually all families with children interact with a varied and significant range of media sources.

The relationship between television violence and antisocial and aggressive behavior is one of the most well researched areas in communications and criminology. Studies on the effects of TV violence in the 1960s and 1970s were one of the most well funded and extensively studied areas in the social sciences (Sparks, 1992), and there have been over 1000 studies on the effects of TV and film violence over the past 40 years. Research on the influence of TV violence on aggression has consistently shown that TV violence increases aggression and social anxiety, cultivates a “mean view” of the world, and negatively impacts real-world behavior. The *National Institute of Mental Health*, *American Academy of Pediatrics*, *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, and the *American Medical Association* concluded that TV Violence leads to real-world violence (Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 1999). More recent research has further clarified the role that media violence plays in the production of real-world violence suggesting that media violence produces short-term increases in aggression by triggering an automatic inclination toward imitation, enhancing autonomic arousal, and priming existing cognitive scripts (Anderson et al., 2003). Other researchers suggest that the attack against television violence by politicians, scientists, parents, and others is unwarranted and that TV violence actually serves an innate human function by serving as a “the most recent and least damaging venue for the routinized working out of innate aggressiveness and fear” (Fowles, 1999, p. 119).

Media effects research has focused on a number of key theoretical areas in the research literature on the effects of mass media technology on criminal behavior. Six theoretical mechanisms have been identified in the literature that contribute to the knowledge-base on the influence of violent media (Sparks & Sparks, 2002):

- 1) **Catharsis:** Media violence provides a cathartic outlet that allows viewers to engage in fantasy aggression that reduces the need to carry out aggressive behavior.

- 2) ***Social Learning:*** Media characters serve as role models. If people see aggressive characters being rewarded rather than punished for the behavior, they will be more likely to imitate the behavior.
- 3) ***Priming:*** Exposure to violent media images plants aggressive and violent cues in people's minds making them easily cognitively accessible. These cues interact with the viewers emotional state and can increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior.
- 4) ***Arousal:*** People become physiologically aroused when they view media violence in a way that intensifies the emotional state of the viewer.
- 5) ***Desensitization:*** The more violent media a person consumes, the more dulled a person's sensitivity to violence will become. This can contribute to aggressive behavior by reducing the recognition that aggression and violence are behaviors that should be curtailed.
- 6) ***Cultivation and Fear:*** Viewing violent media cultivates a particular social reality and induces high levels of fear that can persist for days, months, or years after initial exposure.

All six of these theoretical areas have been explored at length in the media effects literature. All but the catharsis theory have received empirical support.<sup>4</sup>

Questions remain regarding the factors that mediate media violence effects and its influence on criminal behavior. While the "scientific debate over whether media violence increases aggression and violence is essentially over" (Anderson et al., 2003, p. 81) concluding that no one is immune to the powerful effects of media violence, the underlying psychological processes and magnitude of media-violence effects on extreme forms of violence is still underexplored. The bulk of the literature is based on studies that have investigated the impact of media violence on aggression. Review of the studies that have specifically focused on *criminal* aggression yield very different results and do not provide empirical evidence that viewing violent portrayals causes crime (Savage, 2004). To date there are inconsistent findings regarding the factors that mediate the extent to which media violence influences violent behavior. Factors, such as viewer characteristics, social-environmental influences, nature of media content, and level of interaction with media source, are all likely to play a role in whether or not and how violent media influences criminal behavior:

After 50 years and over 1,000 studies ... there is ... not a single research study which is even remotely predictive of the Columbine massacre or similar high school shootings... as for making the explicit connection between on-screen mayhem by the bodies of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, the minds of Oliver Stone and Wes Craven, and real-life singular, serial or mass murder, scientific psychology, albeit

noble and earnest in its tireless efforts, has simply not delivered the goods. It asserts the *causa nexus* but doesn't actually demonstrate it" (Fischhoff, 2004, p. 31).

Sparks and Sparks (2002, p. 277) ask, "If most scholars agree that the research evidence tends to converge on the conclusion that exposure to media violence causes aggressive behavior, then why has scholarly and public debate on this topic produced so much controversy?"

The media effects research has consistently showed that violent media accounts for 10-15% of the variance in aggressive behavior in any given study. However, this means that 85-90% of the variance is attributable to something else. On the other hand, in statistical terms, for one factor to account for 10-15% of the picture in explaining aggressive behavior is impressive. Critics of the media violence research also note that if only one person out of millions who watch a violent film is inspired to mimic the violence, then this small statistical effect is virtually unpreventable given the diversity of viewers. On the other hand, small statistical effects can translate into large social problems with tragic consequences. If one person out of thousands watching a violent film is inspired to mimic the violence and ends up murdering one or more people, it is imperative that researchers continue to examine the influence of violent media to be able to explain what happened with that individual with the hope of someday being able to develop predictive models or preventive measures.

### **Toward a Theoretical Framework for Empirical Examination of the Copycat Effect on Criminal Behavior**

#### **Copycat Crime**

Copycat crime has been defined as a crime that is inspired by another crime. To be a copycat, a crime "must have been inspired by an earlier, publicized crime – that is, there must be a pair of crimes linked by the media" (Surette, 1998, p. 137). Copycat crime can be motivated by a real or fictional media or artistic representation whereby the offender incorporates aspects of the original offense (e.g., method/technique, choice of victim) into a new crime (Black, 1990, Coleman, 2004, Surette, 1990, 1998, 2002, 2012, 2013). Imitated crimes have occurred after intense media coverage of workplace violence, product tampering, hate crimes, mass murder, hijacking, and terrorism and after fictional depictions of robbery, murder, arson, carjacking, rape, and other types of crimes on TV, film, and video games. The

copycat effect is also sometimes referred to as the “contagion effect,” “imitation,” “mimesis,” and “clusters” and generally refers to the “power of mass communication and culture to create an epidemic of similar behaviors” (Coleman, 2004, p. 1). Identifying copycat crimes can be problematic because the media can influence individual criminal behavior in subtle and not so subtle ways, quantitatively and qualitatively (Surette, 1990). It is often difficult to know when an offense is linked to an earlier offense and in some cases crimes are characterized as copycats when they are not.

Early references to the copycat phenomenon appeared in the 1800s involving behaviors thought to be inspired by books. Johann Most’s book *Revolutionary War Science* published in 1885 -- a how-to terrorist manual, was associated with the 1886 Chicago Haymarket Square bombing (Surette, 1998). Gabriel Tarde was the first to offer a theoretical discussion of copycat crime in the early 1900s coining the term “suggesto-imitative assaults” to describe his observation that sensational violent crimes appear spur similar incidents (Surette, 1990, p. 93). Sociologists in the 1970s examined the copycat phenomenon with respect to suicide suggesting that the suicide rate increases with the level of media coverage of suicide committed by a famous person. In 1974, sociologist David Phillips coined the term the “*Werther Effect*” to refer to the copycat phenomenon in reference to the 1774 novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In the years following publication of the book in Europe, so many men shot themselves while sitting at their desks with an open copy of the book in front of them, that the book was banned in Germany, Denmark, and Italy (Coleman, 2004). Another well known example of suicide contagion and the copycat effect occurred after Marilyn Monroe’s 1962 suicide was publicized. In the month after her death, the overall suicide rate in the United States increased by 12% and 197, primarily young blond women, appeared to use Monroe as a role model in their own suicides.

There is a growing body of anecdotal evidence suggesting that copycat crime is a very real phenomenon exacerbated by the central role played by media and popular culture in particular in the lives of youth. Classic and popular films such as *Taxi Driver*, *Natural Born Killers*, *The Matrix*, video games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, TV shows, such as *Dexter*, and books, such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *Clockwork Orange*, and *The Secret Agent*, have been associated with copycat crimes. These cases illustrate the



powerful role of media, popular culture, and art play in influencing and shaping criminal behavior (see Appendix). Criminal behavior can be inspired by all sorts of events and cultural artifacts including novels published well before the information age. However, the unprecedented role that technology and mass media play in modern society raises timely questions: Are imitative acts of crime and violence increasing? Do youth today have a unique relationship with media and popular culture that mediates (contributes to or detracts from) the potential for copycat violence? Has celebrity obsession and elevation of the status of “star” and “hero” in contemporary times exacerbated the copycat effect? Is copycat crime a distinct criminal subtype characterized by a blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality and/or some a need for media publicity?

In some respects, the copycat effect of criminal behavior is no different than the copycat effect of prosocial behavior and can be partially explained through learning theory. People, in particular children, imitate what they see in both positive and negative ways. What is the difference between harmless and prosocial acts of imitation and the car theft/ murder committed by teen who plays *Grand Theft Auto* for hours on end? We are all influenced to some extent by popular culture. The extent to which technology has made media and popular culture such an enormous part of everyday life exacerbates the powerful influence of media images. However, imitation is too simplistic a process to fully understand copycat crime (Surette, 1990). There is something about the salient role of technology and media in contemporary life coupled with the elevation of the criminal (specifically serial and mass murderers) to star status and the value placed on public recognition that has been reinforced by American popular culture that together contributes to the particular phenomenon of copycat crime.

The virtual amount of media crime and violence has the potential to increase the copycat effect, not because of the violence itself, but as a result of the glorification of extreme violent crime and the message that committing violence is one route to fame and notoriety. According to Surette (1998), “the news media’s emphasis on drama, violence, and entertainment and the entertainment media’s emphasis on themes of violent criminality appear to work together to foster copycat crimes ...simply for notoriety” (p. 139). There is an enormous disparity between the number of murders and extreme forms of criminal

behavior, such as serial murder, displayed in popular culture and the actual extent of the phenomenon in real-life (Jenkins, 1994). There are serial killer board games, trading cards, and serial killer art. In the 1980s and 1990s, dozens of serial killers were featured on popular magazine covers<sup>5</sup> and films about them were instant box office smashes (Campbell, 2002). Some suggest that the serial killer film has replaced the Western in American genre fiction and that the serial killer has become the “new mythic monster.” This elevation of the serial killer to mythical figure has elevated the status of the serial killer to a supernatural being of and blurred the boundaries between fantasy and reality for the general public, policymakers, and criminal justice professionals. Even police have been known to release offenders because they did not fit the media stereotype of a serial killer (Epstein, 1995).

There are an increasing number of documented cases suggesting that actual serial murderers and school shooters have mimicked and/or altered their behavior based on media stories of actual or fictional killers. Two of the most notorious serial killers in history Gary Ridgeway, the Green River Killer and Dennis Radar, the BTK Killer made reference to following other serial killers in the media in interviews with police.<sup>6</sup> The Columbine School shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, boasted on video about inflicting “the most deaths in U.S. history” in an attempt to one-up other school shooters and Timothy McVeigh’s actions in the Oklahoma bombing (Cullen, 2004). The 2002 D.C. Sniper shootings by John Muhammad and Lee Malvo inspired a series of sniper attacks around the world and Lee Malvo himself was said to have watched the film *The Matrix* over 100 times to prepare himself for the sniper attacks (CNN Transcripts, 2003). And just days before the eighth anniversary of the Columbine murders, Seung-Hui Cho mailed a video of himself to NBC news ranting about Columbine killers Klebold and Harris before going on to murder 32 students and professors on the Virginia Tech campus later that day (Cullen, April 20, 2007), committing the ultimate one-up of his Columbine predecessors. Most recently, Aaron Ybarra, who gunned down students at Seattle Pacific University wrote in his journal two weeks prior to the mass shooting incident that Virginia-Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho and Columbine killer Eric Harris were his idols (Ybarra, May 27, 2014,) Clearly, the behavior of the most extreme serial killers and mass murderers in recent times has been shaped by media and popular culture.

## The Nature and Mechanisms of Copycat Crime

The copycat effect influences crime in two ways: Images presented in media and popular culture can trigger a person to commit criminal behavior or shape the form criminal behavior may take (Surette, 1998, 2012, 2013). Media images may send a would-be offender over the edge or give ideas about how to commit a crime to someone who was planning to commit a crime anyway. Individual, environmental, situational, and media-related factors interact in a unique way to influence whether or not an individual or group of individuals will mimic criminal behavior they see in the media and popular culture (see Figure 1).

----- Insert Figure 1 Here -----

Individual-level criminogenic factors, such as emotional development, personality and/or mental state, cognitive schema, social alienation, use/abuse of facilitators (drugs, alcohol, pornography), history of abuse and/or family dysfunction, and social/physical isolation, increase or decrease the likelihood of mimetic violence and/or influence the extent to which an individual psychologically connects to a particular media source. A person's relationship to media, such as trust in media as a source of information, level and extent of interaction with media, media literacy, artistic literacy, identification with perpetrators in media depiction, susceptibility to "mean world syndrome," influence the extent to which a particular media form will influence a person's cognitive scripts, and in turn, behavior. Cultural factors, including cultural values placed on fame and notoriety, cultural relationship to crime and violence, extent to which others support/reject media as a legitimate source of information, social/cultural acceptance of particular media source, and moral panics, can decrease or increase the importance of media on the individual level. Demographic factors, including age, sex, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, play a role in the type of media, characters, and images a person is likely to identify with. Media-related factors, such as media (over or under) attention to certain crime stories, "language of violence" (Newman, 1998) that glorifies and legitimizes violence, presentation that blurs boundaries between fantasy and reality, "media looping" (showing and reframing an image in another context) (Manning, 1998), and a wide range of content factors related to the specific media source, such as genre confusion, special effects, instant

reincarnation/spawning, lack of consequences for violent acts, presentation of crime as fun, depiction of criminals as superhuman, appeal of offender character, all play a critical role in whether or not a particular media source is likely to influence a specific individual.

The copycat effect can be best understood along a continuum of influence. On one end of the continuum, media and pop cultural influences may play only a minor role in criminal behavior. For example, an offender who picks up an idea from a movie that makes its way into a component of the modus operandi during the commission of a crime. On the other end of the continuum are individuals who may have a severe psychopathological disturbance and have experienced a loss of boundary between fantasy and reality that becomes a major trigger for criminal behavior. On this extreme end of the continuum are individuals who are isolated, personality disordered media junkies for whom pop cultural imagery plays a critical role in the formation of violent fantasy and resulting criminal behavior (See Figure 2).

----- Insert Figure 2 Here -----

The criminogenic copycat effect involves a combination of influences of media content, social context, and individual predisposition. Surette (2013) proposed a theoretical model of copycat crime hypothesizing that there are three distinct paths to copycat crime – Path 1 (central systematic processing where all relevant and available information is assessed before making a decision where the individual actively scrutinizes all available information); Path 2 (heuristic peripheral where decisions are made with incomplete information and only readily available information is accessed and used); and Path 3 (narrative persuasion) where media information is simply absorbed reflecting entertainment education theory and research on the impact of media communicated stories. This model explains copycat crime in terms of different pathways that aid in understanding of the role of individual characteristics and cognitive mechanisms.

Cases in which an offender seeks to become both celebrated and celebrity are an example of the extreme end of the continuum of media influence in shaping criminal behavior. John Hinckley and Mark David Chapman are often cited as classic examples of copycat criminals (e.g., Black, 1990; Surette,

1998). Black (1990) suggests that John Hinckley, who attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan in 1981 and Mark Chapman who murdered John Lennon in 1980, were both “frustrated middle-class youth engaged in a desperate quest for social identity and recognition” (p. 144) who operated “under the influence of mass media” (p. 138):

In the world of the hyperreal, identity is contingent upon image, and individuals exist insofar as they are able to identify themselves with an image generated by the mass media. The individual who lacks a sense of identity may seize upon the image of a public figure that can serve him as a model. Such behavior is quite innocuous when the celebrity-model is already dead.... The problem arises when an anonymous individual tries to appropriate the image of a living celebrity as his own. The progress from celebrity qua model to celebrity qua double culminates in celebrity qua victim. This is to be expected in an age of mass-(re)production when uniqueness seems impossible to achieve: the anonymous individual tries to appropriate the celebrity's unique aura for himself. It takes a violent act of self-creation to transform the anonymous individual from a Nobody to a Somebody (Black, 1990, p. 144).

In the 1980s, Hinckley and Chapman represented a relatively new phenomenon. Black argues that this 1980s form of violence was “historically unprecedented hyperaestheticized violence” (p. 136) and that Chapman and Hinckley were “celebrity assassins” immersed in popular culture and the cultural values of fame and notoriety conveyed through media images. Chapman and Hinckley were consumed by the media, lacked identities, and needed to do something big to someone big in order to matter. Twenty-five years later, the rapidly growing list of copycat crimes and criminals suggests that *hyperaestheticized violence may be the crime wave of the future and technological advances and cultural changes may increase or decrease the number of individuals who sit on the extreme end of the copycat continuum.*

There has been a very limited amount of empirical research on copycat crime. Surette (2002) surveyed 68 incarcerated male serious and violent juvenile offenders and found that 26% indicated they had committed a crime they had seen or heard about in the media. The most common copycat practice is borrowing media crime techniques. Peterson-Manz (2002) compared homicides from 1990-1994 (9,442 cases) with news reports of murder and found that the numbers of homicides were significantly greater in the two weeks following front page news articles covering homicide. These studies are creative attempts at empirically examining copycat crime. However, important questions remain unanswered -- How does technology specifically alter or exacerbate the potential for mimetic crime? If, as evidence suggests,

human beings have mimicked behaviors they have read about in books or heard about around campfires throughout history, what makes the 21<sup>st</sup> century copycat offender different? Has the nature and extent of media imagery and technology exacerbated the copycat phenomenon to the point where a growing number of people are operating under the influence of mass media? What is the difference between the *Catcher in the Rye* copycat (Mark Chapman) and the *Grand Theft Auto* copycat (Devin Moore) – is a computer game, film, or TV news story more instigatory or copycat worthy than a book? Given the difficulty in empirically investigating the phenomenon, theoretical analysis of actual cases provides a starting point for future research.

### **Features of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Culture that Exacerbate the Copycat Effect**

#### **Crime as Art**

One issue rarely discussed in the criminological literature is the notion of crime as art. The view of crime as art, both in culture, and in the minds of individual offenders is a critical piece in understanding the copycat effect on criminal behavior. Black (1990) argues that “our customary experience of murder and other forms of violence is primarily aesthetic” (p.3) --- that we live today in a world of aestheticized hyperreality. Violent crime is a rare event that few people have to experience first-hand. Most people’s experience with violence is media-mediated from television, film, the Internet, books, magazines, visual art, and photographs. America and other cultures have become so media-saturated that media-mediated violence has taken on a life of its own. Film, news media, the Internet, and popular culture are contemporary forms of myth. Instead of sitting around campfires listening to family lore from grandparents, children of today (and those of the past two generations) learn about the world through mass media. The over-attention to media portrayals of crime and this aesthetic relationship to crime and violence on individual and cultural levels plays a critical role in the production of copycat offenses. Media-mediated violence is related to the “unprecedented role played by the media in contemporary society as a mimetic mechanism” (Black, 1990, p. 144). When crime and violence are presented as entertainment on a widespread scale, the potential to blur the boundary between fantasy and reality is high. This blurring of boundaries occurs on a cultural level whenever media and popular culture

make their way into policy and practice in the form of legislation, jury decision-making, law enforcement practice. Glamorization of crime and violence in media and popular culture sends the very powerful message that crime matters, that criminals are worthy of attention, and that the more horrific and extreme the offense is, the more notoriety. On an individual level, when certain types of individuals are repeatedly exposed to certain types of media violence in a culture where violence and violent offenders have superstar status, this appears to be a particularly volatile mix. The aesthetic-critical approach is necessary in making sense of copycat crime where the media has played a major role. In the age of mass communication technology, “reality” for most is a media-mediated. Disciplines and perspectives through which crime and violence are traditionally explored – law, philosophy, sociology, psychology, criminology, etc. fall short in terms of their ability to see through the eyes of the offender because they are not morally neutral. The aesthetic-critical approach offers an alternative lens through which to understand murder and violent crime—one that can offer a phenomenological description rather than a prescriptive assessment of the process underlying copycat or media-mediated crime (Black, 1990).

### **Celebrity Obsession**

Mass media technology has altered the public relationship to celebrities. Celebrities seem familiar because of the amount of time they spend watching them in various forms of media. This voyeuristic relationship between the public and celebrities is culturally supported and reinforced. Mass media technology has also blurred the boundaries between celebrities and non-celebrities making regular people into media-icons through new forms of media such as YouTube, Vine, Facebook, Instagram and other forms of social media. “Cybersocializing is marked by pseudo-relationships that promote getting to know people from afar” (Ellison, 2012, p. 524). With these new forms of social media, the celebrity obsession phenomenon can apply to non-celebrities as well. Obsessional following, stalking behavior, and surveillance activities are sanctioned in American popular culture through TV, films, music, comics, jokes, visual art, and advertisements (Marx, 1995).<sup>7</sup> The fact that popular magazines buy photos of celebrities going grocery shopping for thousands of dollars from paparazzis (sometimes referred to as “stalkerazzis”)<sup>8</sup> willing to engage in risky behaviors with sometimes fatal consequences tells us

something about our relationship to celebrity and the public interest in entertainment voyeurism. Despite known cases of harm and death resulting from obsessed fans and paparazzi, little research attention has been given to the ways in which mass media technology creates new targets for criminal victimization. Media technology creates a familiarity with strangers. The more visible and accessible a person is, the more likely they are to be a target of crime. From a routine activities perspective, “Any activity that separates those who are prone to violence from each other, or from potential victims, is likely to decrease the incidence of violence” (Felson, 1996, p. 116). T.V. and other forms of media have the potential to reduce crime if potential offenders stay at home watching, and away from potential victims and vice versa. However, media technology brings individuals figuratively into our worlds who we would otherwise not know...and this overexposure to media celebrities and the pseudo-familiarity that many people experience with them adds an entirely new dimension to the notion of routine activity. While media technology does physically separate people, it also has to potential to reduce virtual distance and increase virtual accessibility, thus creating a new type of victimization target.

Most victims are selected because they are familiar and accessible. The familiarity with strangers creates the potential for an increased number of stranger-victims. Individuals who suffer from attachment pathology take the usual familiarity with celebrities a step further, developing elaborate fantasies about a particular celebrity – a “narcissistic link” between themselves and the object of their admiration that can turn dangerous or deadly (Meloy, 1992; 1998; Zona et al., 1998). Celebrity stalking perpetrators are likely to have criminal, psychiatric, and drug abuse histories, show evidence of a range of DSM Axis I and Axis II (primarily Cluster B) disorders though most are not psychotic at the time of their offense (Meloy, 1998).<sup>9</sup>

There is a long list of celebrity stalking victims. Actress Theresa Saldana was brutally stabbed multiple times by a fan in 1982. Saldana survived the attack and founded the Victims for Victims Organization. Saldana’s case led to the California Driver’s Policy Protection Act because the perpetrator found her home address through driver’s license records. Twenty-one-year-old actress Rebecca Schaeffer, star in the 1980s sitcom “*My Sister Sam*” was shot dead at her own front door by obsessed fan Robert



Bardo in 1989 and her case indirectly led to stalking laws and specialized stalking units within law enforcement agencies (Harvey, 2002, Orion, 1997). Actress Jodie Foster has long been the subject of John Hinckley's fantasies and whose attention he sought when he attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in 1981. Hinckley's sent detailed letters to Foster while she attended Yale and indicated to authorities after the assassination attempt that his primary motivation was to win Foster's affection. Musician and former Beatle, John Lennon who was murdered at his home in 1980 by Mark David Chapman, an obsessed identity disordered fan who, after reading Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, became angry with Lennon for becoming a "phoney" (Black, 1990; Jones, 1992). Add to this list, Madonna, Brad Pitt, Jennifer Aniston, Steven Spielberg, Gianni Versace (Harvey, 2002), Whitney Houston, Sharon Gless, Janet Jackson, Suzanne Sommers, Paula Abdul, Justine Bateman, Cher, Olivia Newton-John, Vanna White, Kathie Lee Gifford (Orion, 1997), Avril Lavigne (Sullivan, 2004), and Uma Thurman ("Uma Thurman Stalker Indicted," October 12, 2007), all of whom have been the victims of celebrity stalkers who became the crime targets of offenders who formed obsessive media-mediated pseudo-relationships with them. David Letterman, was the victim of two serious celebrity-related offenses, one involving a female stalker,<sup>10</sup> and the other involving the attempted kidnapping for ransom of his son ("Heartfelt Thanks from Letterman," 2005; Wolf, 2005).

The role of celebrities in the age of mass technology is an important consideration in exploring the dynamics of copycat crime.

...modern society promotes, and has adopted, a world of celebrity culture. In this world, people such as pop stars, sports stars, television and film stars and even football managers, achieve status and become 'New Gods' to be followed and worshiped by each generation. For those with obsessive characteristics, ranging from simply obsessed persons to persons suffering advanced paranoid disorders, these 'New Gods' continue to supply new targets for harassment, stalking, and even death (Harvey, 2002, p. xiv).

Celebrities, and to a lesser extent anyone (famous or not) who makes it onto the TV news, Internet, YouTube, or other media form, have an increased amount of exposure that brings with it a red flag that increases the likelihood that they will be the victims of celebrity stalking or a range of other offenses that draw the attention of potential offenders.

The celebrity obsession phenomenon helps to better understand copycat crime in two ways. First, media plays a central role in crime involving celebrities and copycat crime. Both find inspiration in a media source and are driven by and dependent on the cultural power of fame and notoriety. Second, technology gives potential copycats wide access to information that validates and can be used to mimic the behavior of notorious offenders and well publicized cases, in particular those involving celebrities. There are tribute web pages devoted to celebrity stalkers, such as Mark David Chapman and Andrew Cunanan, that detail their methods and beliefs available for anyone who may be an aspiring celebrity stalker (Harvey, 2002). Copycats of celebrity stalking incidents are crimes that most clearly and blatantly reveal the role of media and quest for notoriety. For example, Harvey (2002) describes the case of Sarah Lockett, a news reporter for Meridian Television in England who was stalked by Jeremy Dyer, a fan who sent her over 80 letters from 1998-1999 and was sentenced to prison for two years for harassment. The letters included numerous references to the well publicized celebrity murder of BBC news reporter Jill Dando. Dando was shot in the head at close range at her doorstep in 1999 by Barry George, a media obsessed celebrity stalker who had a history of obsession with a number of celebrities (including Princess Diana and Freddie Mercury, lead singer from the band Queen). The letters by Dyer to Lockett specifically referenced the Dando murder with threatening passages such as:

“You looked a bit miserable on the Monday show. I suppose you would be considering Jill Dando just got her brains blown out by a probable stalker” (Harvey, 2002, p. 149).

“If I had murdered Jill Dando I’d have kidnapped her or done something else to her rather than shooting her in the head...It seems a waste of a victim to me. He could have used her before killing her eg, by raping or assaulting her, getting his money’s worth as it were...” (Harvey, 2002, p. 151).

Dyer used the Dando murder to threaten his victim and to validate and reinforce his own stalking behaviors. Visibility made both Dando and Lockett targets of celebrity stalkers whose fantasies and behaviors were influenced by the cultural emphasis on fame and celebrity voyeurism and facilitated by media technology. The cultural forces that make it appealing to become a notorious celebrity killer are crucial to understanding copycat crime.

**NBK Copycats: A Case Study in Media-Related Factors That Enhance the Copycat Effect**

The 1994 film *Natural Born Killers* by Oliver Stone has been linked to over a dozen copycat crimes and is an illustrative case study in copycat crime. To date, no other film has been linked to so many real-life criminal cases. Of the NBK copycats, three high profile murder sprees committed by young couples in the United States and France received particular notoriety. In November, 1994, 19-year-old Florence Rey and 22-year-old Audry Maupin killed five people during a car chase in Paris that left Maupin dead. Rey, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison, described the shootings as ‘fate’ (a line from the film) and the pair was dubbed “France’s Natural Born Killers.” Soon after the Rey trial, another young couple, 18-year-old Veronique Herbert and her boyfriend Sebastien Paindavoine were tried in Paris for the murder of 16-year-old Abdeladim Gahbiche. Herbert was said to be obsessed with *Natural Born Killers*. It was uncovered during her trial that she had lured her victim to his death with the promise of sex just like a scene in the film<sup>11</sup>. Herbert was accused of being the ringleader in the case and received a 15-year sentence while Paindavoine received a 12-year sentence. In March 1995, teenagers Benjamin Darras and Sarah Edmonson went on a robbery/murder spree after watching *Natural Born Killers* multiple times over a period of days while consuming hallucinogenic drugs. By the end of their spree, they had killed Bill Savage and seriously wounded Patsy Byers whose injuries resulted in her becoming a paraplegic. The two were caught soon after and convicted and sentenced to 35 years each for the Beyers shooting. Darras was also sentenced to Life for Savage’s murder.

The film *Natural Born Killers* is loosely based on the 1958 Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate murder spree (Sargeant, 1996). The story follows Mickey and Mallory, a young, attractive, visually eclectic couple on a road-trip-serial-mass murder spree across the Southwest that results in over 50 murders. The film is shot in 18 different formats including animation, 16 mm and 35 mm cameras, back projection, and High 8 with approximately 3000 rapid-fire cuts with what the film’s animator refers to as a “psychological landscape” depicting Mickey and Mallory’s childhood flashbacks throughout the film through a range of visual genres including superhero/villain animation, TV sitcom, and news-like sequences including a depiction of childhood sexual abuse to the theme of “I Love Lucy,” acts of female aggression to the tune of female metal band “L7,” and psychedelic mushroom trips and heavy/industrial

metal music background music by the “Nine Inch Nails” (Kiselyak, 1996). In the end of the film, there is a brutal prison riot scene (with images strikingly similar to the horrific real-life images of the 1980 New Mexico Prison riot) shot in the famous real-life Illinois Stateville Prison in which (in the Director’s cut edition) the prison warden (played by Tommy Lee Jones) is attacked by rioting inmates who thrust his severed head in the air on a broom stick. The final scene shows the couple executing TV reporter Wayne Gayle (played by Robert Downey Jr.) while he begs for his life. The post-credit images show a domesticated Mickey and pregnant Mallory riding off into the sunset in a motor home with a bunch of kids.

The Darras and Edmondson NBK copycats became the subject of a landmark lawsuit against Oliver Stone. In 1996, Patsy Beyers filed a lawsuit against Oliver Stone, Warner Brothers, Ben Darras and Sarah Edmondson and their families and insurance carriers. Patsy Beyers and her family claimed that Stone, the film’s producers, and the movie theatres that showed the film were liable for producing a film that glorified violence and for distributing a film that they knew or would have known would incite some individuals to commit a crime such as shooting Patsy Beyers. The case was heard by a Louisiana trial judge who concluded that the law does not recognize such a cause of action. The family appealed and by the time the case landed in the Louisiana Court of Appeals, more than a dozen copycat shootings had been linked to *Natural Born Killers*. A source for the plaintiff’s counsel was author John Grisham, who had been a friend of Edmondson and Darras’s first victim Bill Savage. Grisham wrote a scathing article attacking Stone and accusing him of intentionally producing a film that would cause copycat violence (Black, 1998; Grisham, 1996). The court of appeals ruled that the case had to go to trial because the plaintiff alleged that Stone had intentionally to create a film that would cause impressionable viewers to mimic the violence depicted in the film. The case made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1999. The U.S. Supreme Court remanded the case back to the Louisiana Court of Appeals. In 2001, the Louisiana Court dismissed the case finding that there was not enough evidence to indicate that Stone had intended for the film to incite violence (O’Neil, 2001).

While the Darras and Edmondson case is the most well known of the NBK copycats in the U.S., and the Rey/ Maupin and Herbert/Paindavoine cases the most notorious in Europe, a number of other cases have also been linked to the film<sup>12</sup>. In 1994, a 14-year-old boy was accused of decapitating a 13-year-old girl. The boy told police he wanted to be famous “like the natural born killers” (Brooks, 2002; “Oliver Stone and Natural Born Killers Time Line,” n.d.; Patten, 1997). Twenty-one year old William Soddors of Rock Point N.Y. was turned in by his father for killing a local firefighter. His father told police that the son was obsessed with *Natural Born Killers* and that he shot the firefighter with a stolen 9mm for the thrill (Patten, 1997). In Salt Lake City, Nathan Martinez wore tinted round sunglasses and shaved his head like Micky Knox and then shot his stepmother and 10-year-old sister. When arrested he told police how much he loved *Natural Born Killers* (Patten, 1997). In 1995, four individuals in their 20s were accused of killing a truck driver in Georgia after seeing *Natural Born Killers* 19 times (Schweizer, 1998). One of the co-defendants in a Massachusetts murder case in 1995 bragged to his girlfriend that he and his accomplice are “natural born killers” (Schweizer, 1998). School shooters including Michael Carneal in Paducah, Kentucky, Barry Loukaitis in Moses Lake, Washington, and Columbine perpetrators Klybold and Harris, had all seen and made reference to *Natural Born Killers*. According to the prosecutor in the Loukaitis case (Loukaitis was a 15-year-old who killed a teacher and two classmates with a high-powered rifle in a junior high school algebra class in 1996), he got ideas to plan and carry out the murders from Stephen King’s book *Rage* (written under a pseudonym) and the film *Natural Born Killers* (Pankratz & Ingold, 2003). In 2007, 13 years after the release of the film, 12-year-old Jasmine Richardson and her 23-year-old boyfriend Jeremy Allen Steinke murdered Richardson’s parents and eight-year-old brother in Alberta, Canada. During their 2007 trial, it was discovered that the couple had a fixation with death and Goth subculture, had watched the film *Natural Born Killers*, and that Steinke watched the film while high on Cocaine and got the idea to “rescue” Richardson like Mickey had done in the film. Richardson was convicted of three counts of 1<sup>st</sup> degree murder, the youngest person in North American history to ever receive this sentence (Shapiro, 2007).

*Natural Born Killers* and the NBK copycats illustrate the power of technology and popular culture to exacerbate the copycat phenomenon. There are a number of elements in NBK that could be hypothesized to have exacerbated the copycat effect including: The psychedelic psychological background landscapes used in the film, the use of multiple types of film formats which could have had the potential to create genre confusion, gratuitous violence, presentation of serial murder as fun, justification for violence in the childhood histories of the murderous main characters, use of violence as a form of feminist empowerment,<sup>13</sup> appealing characters who were in love, the happily-ever-after ending, and excessive media looping (Helfgott, 2008). The central issue in the Beyers' lawsuit was a statement made by Oliver Stone about the film at its premier. He said, "The most pacifist people in the world said they came out of this movie and wanted to kill somebody" (O'Neil, 2001, p. 157). Identifying what made this film so influential in the minds of these copycat offenders, and whether or not a causal role can be attributed to the film, is an empirical question of great importance for future research.

There were a number of factors that are likely to have played a role in the mimetic potential of NBK – all minimizing the distinction between fantasy and reality for viewers. First, the film was full of media loops. A media loop involves showing and reframing an image in another context – such as an instant replay, a clip of a real-life event within a fictional film, or footage from an original news story replayed within the context of another form of entertainment or news program (e.g., 20/20 or 60 Minutes) (Manning, 1998). NBK includes a barrage of images of past criminal events, including the Charles Whitman killing spree at the University of Texas in 1966, the Manson murders, the Rodney King beating, Richard Ramirez, and the Menendez Brothers, O.J. Simpson, and Lorena Bobbitt trials moving back and forth from the fictional characters/storyline to real-life violent media events. According to one commentator, "even to a generation raised on MTV and Sega games, this is the cinematic equivalent of staring into a strobe light for two hours" (Patten, 1997, p. 3). The film also contained a complex sort of media loop that might best be called a "*copycat loop*," a type of media loop that shows/reframes an image of a copycat crime in another context – such as reference to a real-life copycat crime in a television show, film, computer game, etc.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the entire film itself was a copycat loop. NBK was one in a string of

many film depictions of the 1958 Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate murder spree.<sup>15</sup> Copycat loops, even more so than other types of media loops, distort and blur the boundary between reality and fantasy while glorifying mimetic violence. This is double trouble because the media loops themselves confuse the audience while the glamorization and normalization of copycat crime provides a convenient and appealing cognitive distortion for media junkies who already have difficulty deciphering the line between fantasy and reality. For people who are not media junkies, copycat loops creates cognitive confusion that may have the potential to make crime and murder look appealing to individuals who do not have violent inclinations or risk factors, in particular young people who are in various stages of rebellion. Second, the most appealing characters in the film are the serial killing young lovers Mickey and Mallory Knox who are both physically attractive and who make murder look like fun. Films and media images that ask the audience to identify with violent characters by making them likable while glamorizing and making excuses for the violence they engage in increases the potential for copycat violence. Third, NBK depicts female violence in a manner that is contradictory and confusing, empowering, and infantilizing. Mallory Knox is portrayed as a victim of sexual assault and incest who is rescued by bad boy Mickey who murders her parents (with her help) and is taken off into the sunset. Mallory Knox evolves into a killer with fragmented emotions who, if sexually harassed or devalued, responds with violence. What is so contradictory about her character is that she is physically small, emotionally vulnerable with Mickey, and simultaneously portrayed as a victim and predator. In theatres during the opening night of the film, audiences raved and cheered as Mallory broke necks and shot dead men who humiliated or sexualized her. Like her character, her violence both horrified and empowered audiences, and became the inspiration for a string of unprecedented violent female copycats (Helfgott, 2008).

Boyle (2001) argues that the way in which Mallory Knox is depicted in NBK is consistent with the way in which female violent offenders are presented in real-life. When a man commits a violent act, in fantasy or reality, he is much more likely to be presented as a violent “natural born killer” than a female counterpart. According to Boyle (p. 315), “Mickey fills a recognizable (male) space in Western culture” while Mallory must be explained and understood. Interestingly, Oliver Stone says he chose Woody

Harrelson for the part of Mickey Knox because Harrelson's real-life father is in prison for murder. Stone suggests in the Director's cut interview that Harrelson himself has known violence because it is in his blood. The masculinization of violence in the film serves to make male violence normal and invisible. The NBK copycats were unique in that while violent copycat crimes have been perpetrated by boys and men, NBK inspired a string of female offenders to commit murder. However, as Boyle (2001) suggests, in the film and real-life even though the female perpetrators were just as instrumentally aggressive and violent as their male counterparts, they were depicted as expressively motivated and their crimes were explained away in ways that the male offenders' crimes were not.

The blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality throughout NBK is a critical factor to consider with respect to the number of real-life offenses the film is said to have inspired.<sup>16</sup> The number of known copycat offenses that have been associated with the film and the backgrounds of the NBK copycat offenders warrants attention as a case study of the interaction between individual-level and media source characteristics that have the capacity to exacerbate the copycat effect. NBK can be thought of as a "*social dream*" -- a cultural product distinctive in that it so closely captures an aspect of current impulses and conflicts of society that its content, while quite fantastic, passes without reflection or comment by the general public (Reiber & Green, 1989). *Natural Born Killers* did evoke reaction and comment by the general public, film critics, and politicians to the graphic violence, but did not evoke a reaction the film's central theme.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this is what largely made *Natural Born Killers* so appealing to would-be copycat criminals. On its surface, the film was a glorious display of unabashed violence. On a less overt level, it was a virtual reflection of the bizarre cultural glorification of both celebrity and infamy -- a message that directly appeals to and validates the psyches of known copycat offenders who, like many of the film's critics, were not inclined or able to process the deeper substantive message Stone intended to convey.

### **Offender Characteristics, Media Effects, Cultural Facilitators, and Copycat Crime**

A film, such as NBK, raises question regarding the potential for a media source to trigger the copycat effect in individuals who would not otherwise commit violent acts. However, while NBK and other films (e.g., *The Matrix*) have been associated with more than a single copycat crime, it remains the



case that audiences en masse do not exit theatres channeling Mickey and Mallory Knox. Identification of the subset of individuals likely to commit copycat crime and risk factors for the copycat effect on criminal behavior is critical in violence prevention, threat assessment and threat management (see Meloy & Hoffman, 2014). Meta-analyses support the General Aggression Model (GAM) – that repeated exposure to violent people and situations increases aggression by altering an individual's affective state, priming aggressive cognitions, and inducing physiological arousal; and viewing violent acts teaches behaviors that are then aggressively acted-out (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Anderson & Bushman, 2001, 2002). The effects of violent media can be best understood from a risk and resilience framework that considers factors that facilitate and inhibit violence and media effects (Gentile & Bushman, 2012). Oliver (2002) notes individual-level factors that influence the effects of media violence including individual affinities, readiness to respond, personality traits, disposition toward characters in media, and selective attention, avoidance, perception, and memory and suggests that “unexplained variance can be appreciated as representing the opportunity for researchers to explore the importance of individual differences in the media effects process” (p. 520). Individual-level factors interact with media factors and environmental cultural influences to produce different types of criminal behavior.

A synthesis of the research literature on the effects of violent media, the psychology of mimetic criminal behavior, and analysis of case studies of known copycat offenders reveals a number of factors that appear to play a role in copycat crime. These factors can be organized into six categories of individual-level factors and cultural-environmental factors (Helfgott, 2008):

1) Demographic Characteristics

- Age
- Sex

2) Criminogenic Factors

- Mental Disorder (Axis I/Conduct, Bipolar, Substance-Related, Psychotic, Delusional, Paraphilia)<sup>18</sup>
- Personality disorder (DSM Axis II/Cluster B)
- Developmental failure in attachment/human bonding/lack of identity
- Cognitive schema of viewer/Extremist beliefs
- Social isolation and alienation
- Aggressive traits/use of aggression as approach to conflict resolution

## 3) Relationship to Media

- Trust in media as a source of information
- Media literacy
- Artistic literacy
- Identification with perpetrators featured in media source (with respect to gender, age, ethnicity, lifestyle, personal aesthetic, beliefs, habits, experiences, characteristics, etc.)
- Extent to which viewer uses media as a source of information
- Forms of media sources used and level of interaction with source

## 4) Media Characteristics

- Imagery and storyline that blurs boundaries between fantasy and reality
- Demographics of characters
- Appeal an physical attractiveness of characters
- Positive response to violence and crime (e.g., happy ending for criminals)
- Media Loops
- Language of violence -- how crime and violence is contextualized, weapons, validation and tolerance for antisocial behavior.

## 5) Cultural-Environmental Factors

- Cultural values placed on fame and notoriety
- Cultural relationship to crime and violence
- Extent to which others support/reject media as a legitimate source of information
- Social/cultural acceptance of particular media source
- Moral panics

While age, sex, and criminogenic factors are associated with criminal behavior more generally (some more than others), it is the particular interaction between these factors and the individual's relationship to media that is critical in creating the propensity for copycat criminal behavior. Other individual and demographic factors, such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc., may play a role in the characters, themes, and media forms with which an individual is likely to identify.

Research on the effects of violent media suggests that age and emotional development play a role in an individual's reaction to violent media content (Lloyd, 2002). There is strong evidence to suggest that exposure to violent media such as video game violence, produces short-term changes in brain activity (Hummer et al., 2010)<sup>19</sup>. Research also suggests that aggressive youth seek out violent media and that media violence predicts aggression in youth in a mutually reinforcing, downward spiral model (Slater et al., 2003) and that personality and situational variables (school alienation, peer victimization, sensation seeking and dispositional receptivity to arousing stimuli) moderate the relationship between violent media and aggression. Furthermore, some individuals are more suggestible than others and more susceptible to

pathological fantasy and dissociative symptomatology (Terhune et al., 2011) which may play a role in the individual response to violent media. Thus, findings suggest that the younger and less emotionally developed, the greater the media exposure, the greater the number of moderating personality and situational variables, and the more suggestible, the greater the likelihood of a relationship between violent media and aggressive behavior. Research on criminal behavior, in particular media-related crimes, such as celebrity stalking (Meloy, 1998), shows that failure in developmental bonding, formation of disordered identity, diagnosis with Axis I mental disorders and Axis II/Cluster B personality disorders, social isolation and alienation, disordered cognitive schema, and aggressive traits play a role in copycat criminal behavior. These findings are further supported by anecdotal evidence that suggest that the majority of known copycat offenders were under age 25 when they committed their offenses and that these individuals are socially alienated individuals who possess a range of developmental, identity, and mental health issues exacerbated by situational factors such as peer associations, immersion in various forms of media, lack of parental supervision, and access and availability of firearms.

Identification of risk factors for the copycat effect on criminal behavior requires interdisciplinary integration and attention to the complex interplay of individual, developmental, situational, environmental and cultural factors. Gazono (2001) suggests that a primary element in understanding individual effects of media violence is powerlessness at the level of individual, families, and society, with lack of self-efficacy is a critical element in individual-level media effects, and that children of parents who feel powerless often grow up to feel powerless themselves and these individuals are more likely to be attracted to violent media and its effects. Shim (2004) found that children's TV viewing was predicted by parental education and the number of peers they have while violent game playing was predicated by parenting practices including harsh discipline and media parenting and that different predictors are present for different age, sex, and race/ethnicity subgroups. Multiple risk-factors have been identified for youth violence such as family transiency and disruption, substance abuse, poor information processing and problem solving skills, lack of parental supervision, inability to deal with negative feelings, lack of attachment, and lack of economic opportunity among others. Risk factors that have been associated with

crimes that have involved a mimetic component, such as school shootings, include family stresses, access to guns, obsession with violence in some form of media, feelings of inferiority, and expressed wishes to commit violent acts with exposure to violent media -- “yet another ingredient in an already volatile mix” (Gaziano, 2001, p. 220). Theory and research examining the interrelationship between early childhood and adolescent development, personality, and childrearing lends support for the identification of a cluster of risk factors that exacerbate the copycat effect on criminal behavior.

This complex and unique interaction between these demographic, criminogenic, and media-related factors distinguishes the propensity for copycat criminal behavior. Exposure to media violence has been empirically identified as a risk factor for aggression (Gentile & Bushman, 2012). And individual-level factors such as high trait aggressiveness have been associated with both choosing violent media and increased aggression following viewing violent media (Bushman, 1995). Other individual-level factors have been attributed to aggression, such as sex (with males adolescents producing more violent imagery in response to violent media) (Hess et al., 1999) and that males hold a more hostile view of the world after playing violent video games (Anderson & Dill, 2000). Riddle et al. (2011) found that individuals with vivid memories give higher prevalence estimates of real-world crime and violence supporting a memory-heuristic processing model that may also play a role in media violence effects on aggressive and violent behavior. Recent research examining dispositional factors and media effects have found that genetic disposition for ADHD-related behaviors are associated with greater violent media use (Nikkelen et al, 2014).

The interaction between individual-level factors and the media source is just beginning to be examined. Shafer (2009) examined the degree to which viewers morally disengage from actions of violent fictional characters and frequent exposure and affinity for violent media is correlated with moral disengagement.<sup>20</sup> For example Anderson and Murphy (2003) suggest that the effect of violent video game violence might be greater when the game player controls a same-sex violent game character. In addition, the degree to which an individual trusts and uses media as a source of information about the world (Helfgott, 2008), the extent to which the individual identifies with characters depicted in the media

source (Gerbner, 1994; Katz in Jhally, 1999), artistic illiteracy (Black, 1990), and media illiteracy (Gerbner, 1994) interact with media-related influences and the nature of the media content and presentation (Manning, 1998, Newman, 1998) to produce copycat crime.

The interaction between individual-level factors and characteristics of the media source need further examination with focus on specific types of media and their interaction with individual-level characteristics such as demographic characteristics, personality, trait-aggressiveness, and psychopathy-level in an era of rapidly changing and global digital media environment. The creators of violent media are engaged in rapid market-driven ante-upping. For example, Ellison (2012) notes that violent video games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* that have been considered the most extreme and interactive forms of media violence on the market in recent years pale in comparison with internet-based games such as *RapeLay* where the player follows a mother and her daughters into a subway station with the goal of stalking and raping them. The exponential increase in violent media, combined with the degree to which digital media has saturated our lives on a global level, has the potential to result in the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality through repeated exposure to media violence and the influence of violent media on preconscious scripts. Cultural saturation of social media can disrupt or break human connections that inhibit violence for most people.<sup>21</sup> “Lack of face-to-face interactions in the pseudo-relationships of the virtual world can have a cruel downside” (Ellison, 2012, p. 524).

Empirical research is needed to answer questions such as -- What individual-level characteristics are empirically associated with attraction to the more extreme forms of media violence? Do the more extreme and repulsive forms of media violence have a different effect on different individuals (e.g., the more extreme and realistic, the more repulsive and non-criminogenic to the average media consumer, but perhaps the more attractive and criminogenic for a small subset of psychopathologically-disturbed individuals who are utilizing the media as facilitators to potentially act out their elements of highly developed violent fantasy-life), Do sex, age, race/ethnicity, and/or other demographic play a role in an individual's reaction and processing of these extreme forms of media violence? Do prosocial outcomes of

digital media technology counteract the antisocial outcomes (e.g., the use of social media as a platform to speak out against violence or as a memorial to violent crime victims)?

## Discussion

### The Influence of Mass Media Technology on Criminal Behavior

Mass media technology breeds false familiarity, a blurred line between fantasy and reality, and a virtual realm within which rationalizations and feelings of guilt (that normally help to mediate criminal action) are absolved (Ellison, 2012; Helfgott, 2008,). Mass media technology has changed the modus operandi of criminal elements throughout history and current technological advances have changed the physical environment in which crime occurs (Britz, 2004). Technology shapes M.O. behavior, exacerbates some types of offenses, and creates entirely new motivational influences and categories of criminal behavior. Celebrity stalkers have fewer targets in times and places where little value placed on “stars” and where there is no TV, film, or Webcast to simultaneously blast millions of images (and notions) of a person into living rooms worldwide. Teenagers who derive their identity through online gaming communities while shunned in their own physical communities are developmentally frozen in a distinct space between their actual and virtual worlds. Criminologists can no longer ignore the ways in which mass media technology have and will continue to shape crime. On the individual level, technology shapes offender motivation and modus operandi, and the development of deviant identity. Socially and culturally, technology has changed the nature of social life, which in turn has a profound effect on the nature and dynamics of criminal behavior.

Mass media technological influences on criminal behavior exist along a continuum. In some cases, mass media technology plays a minor role (e.g., getting an idea from a movie that makes its way into a real-life crime). In other cases, drives, motivation, M.O., and the very nature of the offense (e.g., copycat murderers who act are psychologically and culturally immersed in and act on a pop cultural script). Compare, for example, the NBK or GTA copycats with another well known murder case in which the offenders were said to have been influenced by media. In 1974, there was a well known mass murder in Ogden, Utah that came to be called the “H-Fi Murders.” The offenders, Dale Pierre Selby and William

Andrews, shot five people during a robbery of a Hi-Fi stereo shop while a third offender, Keith Roberts, waited in the getaway car. Three of the victims were murdered and two were gravely wounded.<sup>22</sup> This crime became well known for a number of reasons. It was an extreme mass murder committed in a small quiet town and the offenders were black men enlisted in the Air Force stationed nearby and the victims were white long-time members of the community. However, the notoriety of this case is more likely the result of the method in which Selby and Andrews committed the crime. Prior to shooting the victims in the head, Selby raped one of the victims (18-year-old Michelle Ansley); then the pair forced all five of the victims to drink drain cleaner. The investigation revealed that Pierre and Andrews had gotten the drain cleaner idea from the Clint Eastwood movie *Magnum Force* in which a pimp murdered a prostitute by forcing her to drink drain cleaner. In the film, the victim died immediately. In the Hi-Fi case, the victims choked, vomited, coughed and wretched after being forced to drink the cleaner. The offenders then shot them (the medical examiner who testified in the case indicated that the victims would have eventually died from the drain cleaner, but that the process would have taken up to 12 hours). Douglas and Olshaker (1999) argue that “these two sadistic creeps would have committed this crime regardless of what they had seen or heard. What the media influenced was the details” (p. 107). Douglas contends that if he were to have profiled this case as an unsolved crime, the behavior speaks for itself and it would have made little difference that the offenders had seen *Magnum Force*. Selby and Andrews had seen *Magnum Force* two times during the course of making detailed plans to commit the robbery including renting a storage space for the stolen merchandise. Pierre had a history and previous conviction for auto theft and after his execution in 1987, Kinder said, “It did not bother me at all when they executed [Selby],” “Pierre Dale Selby was a psychopath. The other two men were terrified of him.”

This offense differs from the NBK and GTA copycats, the John Hinckley case, The Matrix cases, and the recent case of the Seattle Pacific University mass shooter who was enamored with the Columbine and Virginia-Tech killers, in that a particular aspect of the offenders’ M.O. was inspired by the film. Selby and Andrews did not commit the offense under the influence of mass media in Hinckley-style offense. In his study of self-reported copycat crime among juvenile offenders, Surette (2002) found that

the most common copycat practice is borrowing media crime techniques. Selby and Andrews use of the film-inspired use of drain cleaner as a murder/assault weapon is not unlike the 25% of offenders in Surette's study who indicated they had committed a crime they had seen or heard about in the media.

Understanding the level of influence of technology on criminal behavior in general, and individual offenses in particular, has important implications for the development of criminological theory and criminal justice practice. Lloyd (2002) offers four suggestions to guide future research regarding the criminogenic influence of mass media technology: 1) Psychometrically sound instruments that quantify media influences used to assess a range of media technology to assess the nature and extent of criminogenic influence; 2) Identification of individual and ecological variables (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity and ecological factors such as peer culture) predictive of consumption patterns and differential views of media that may play a key role in the perception of media images and their integration into an individual's personal identity; 3) Increased precision in conceptualizing media influences on specific developmental tasks (e.g., risk taking behavior, maladaptive cognitive processing); and 4) Examination of individuals (specifically adolescents) who identify with prosocial media messages to understand the range of positive and negative outcomes. These are important next steps to develop an empirical framework to examine technology as a risk factor for certain types of criminal behavior and to support or refute mounting anecdotal evidence supporting the copycat effect on criminal behavior.

### Concluding Comments

Technology, media, and popular culture shape offender choices and criminal behavior in unique ways – from the decision to commit a crime, the type of crime, and/or the manner in which it is committed to providing a ready-made script for rationalization techniques to neutralize offense behavior. It is impossible to ignore the role that media and computer technology play in shaping offender motivation, modus operandi, and in neutralizing guilt and providing justification for offenders' actions. Given the power of technology to influence criminal behavior, copycat crime could be considered as a distinct subtype or supertype<sup>23</sup> of criminal behavior that traverses all major crime categories (Helfgott, 2008). Technological influences on criminal behavior exist along a continuum. Depending on the



particular offense, the influence of media and/or computer technology plays more or less of a role in terms of the centrality influence with respect to the nature or essence of the offense. Understanding the level of influence of technology on criminal behavior has important implications for the development of criminological theory and criminal justice practice.

As media and computer technology continue to rapidly advance and an increasingly central role in people's lives, the greater the importance of developing theory and conducting empirical research on the relationship between mass media technology and criminal behavior. With the bulk of the empirical studies focusing on the relationship between violent media and general aggression, and much of the research literature comprised of anecdotal accounts that have yet to be empirically validated, important questions are left unanswered --Are children who are born and grow up with mass media technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century more or less likely to be criminogenically influenced by media? Is there empirical support for technology-criminal behavior continuum? Does technological influence on criminal behavior exist along a continuum of severity? If so, what individual, situational, media, social, cultural, and other characteristics distinguish the low versus high technology influenced offender? As digital media technology becomes more sophisticated and video and other virtual reality games more realistic, is there more/less potential for cathartic versus criminogenic effects of virtual violence? Is there an empirically identifiable cluster of factors that constitute an individual, culture, or context at high risk for copycat crime?

The development and empirical validation of theory on violent media effects and the copycat effect on criminal behavior is a critical area for future exploration. With the degree to which mass media technology has altered social conditions and the cultural landscape, technology will play a salient role in influencing offender motivation and modus operandi across all offense categories. Methodological difficulties in empirically studying the link between violent media and criminal behavior pose complex and difficult questions. However, it is increasingly important to continue to build a theoretical framework to empirically investigate and to better understand the nature of copycat effect on criminal behavior and

the ways in which digital and mass media technologies interact with individual, situational, social, and cultural factors to produce a web of criminogenic influence.

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### Appendix Copycat Crime Examples

- **BASKETBALL DIARIES (1995)** – Scene in the film, based on the book of the same name by Jim Carroll, is claimed to have partially inspired Columbine shooters Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. In the scene, the character played by Leonardo DiCaprio has a dream where he walks into a school with a long black trenchcoat and automatic weapon and begins firing. The videotaped images of Kleybold and Harris during the Columbine murders were strikingly similar to the scene in the Basketball Diaries (Segal & Enos, 1991; Coleman, 2004).
- **BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD (1993-1997)** - blamed for inciting children to start fires, some of which were fatal (Surette, 1998).
- **CATCHER IN THE RYE (1951)** - Mark David Chapman believed himself to be Holden Caulfield the main character in the book. He murdered John Lennon in 1980 after years of fixation on both Lennon and Caulfield. He is believed to have murdered Lennon because he viewed him as a “phony,” a term Caulfield used to refer to people (Black, 1991).
- **CHILD’S PLAY 3 (1993)** – Film allegedly influenced two 10 year-old boys (Jon Venebles and Robert Thompson) who abducted two year-old James Bulger from shopping mall, took him on a 2 ½ mile walk to a railway, tortured and murdered him. The murder was similar to a scene in the film and the father of one of the boys was said to have rented the film in the week before the murder (Segal & Enos, 1991).
- **CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971)** – film associated with rape of a 17 year-old girl by male youths singing “singing in the rain” and string of brutal rapes and murders in Britain by men dressed similarly to the characters attributed to either the film or the book. Kubrick pulled the film in Britain in 1972 and it wasn’t re-released there until 2000 (Coleman, 2004).
- **COLUMBINE SCHOOL SHOOTING (1999)** -- The Columbine incident, and news coverage of the event, itself inspired copycats including a school shooting in Toronto, Canada by a 14 year-old diagnosed with conduct disorder and said to be bordering on the threshold of a diagnosis of psychopathy who was fixated on the Columbine shootings. Other school shooters have been said to be inspired by media including Barry Loukaitis in the Moses Lake, Washington shooting in 1996 who was inspired by the *Pearl Jam video Jeremy* and Michael Carneal in the West Paducah Kentucky shooting influenced by the *Basketball Diaries*. Most recently, Seung-Hui Cho, the gunman in Virginia Tech massacre specifically referred to Columbine in videotapes he made of himself on the day of the shootings.
- **CRIME MOB -“KNUCK IF YOU BUCK” (2004)** -- The song “Knuck If You Buck” by the group Crime Mob was commonly put on the “banned” or “do not play list” around the US due to the song’s prevalent inciting of violence when played. The song even caused an outbreak of brawls at Harvard University in late October of 2007 according to Harvard’s newspaper *The Crimson*. The term “Knuck if you buck” translates in common slang as “knuckle up if you’re buck wild”; which many individuals take literally and start fights and other acts of violence to prove their machismo. (Child, 2007)
- **DEXTER (2006-2013)** -- Mark Andrew Twitchell, a Canadian independent filmmaker, was on his way to becoming a full-fledged serial killer having killed one man but was caught before killing three more. According to Police, Twitchell is said to have been inspired by an episode of the television show "Dexter," a show about a blood spatter analyst for the Miami PD who stalks

and kills serial murderers, in turn making himself a serial killer. Twitchell allegedly created his own plot line for a film about a murder, which he would then use as blueprints for his later actions. (Huff, 2008).

- **DOOM I & II (1993, 1994)** – Violent computer role playing game associated with Columbine shooting and a number of the school shootings and other crimes. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were avid players of Doom and were members of a community of Doom players who played the game on the Internet.
- **DOOMSDAY FLIGHT (1966)** – Bomb threats were reported by airlines after this TV movie aired (Surette, 1998).
- **EASY E AND NWA (1991)** - A group of kids in Texas were put in prison for a string of robberies and claimed they “got hyped” by their music (Surette, 1998).
- **FIRE IN THE HOLE! (2007)** -- A seemingly harmless prank on fast food drive-thru attendants becomes a serious concern and catches the eye of law enforcement when a video of the prank is broadcasted on YouTube and is reenacted around the US according to law enforcement and reporters. The prank consists of an individual ordering food at any drive-thru fast food restaurant and after paying for and receiving their food, the occupants of the vehicle call out “Fire in the hole!” and throw their food or drink back at the attendant through the pick-up window. (The Pittsburg Channel, 2007)
- **GONE IN 60 SECONDS (2000)** -- film reportedly incited a number of car theft sprees in the United States and Canada.
- **GRAND THEFT AUTO VICE CITY (2002)** –18 year-old Devin Moore allegedly played the game for hours before stealing a car and gunning down two police officers and a 911 dispatcher in 2003. When captured he said “Life is like a video game. Everybody’s got to die some time.” At trial, it was revealed that he was a compulsive violent video game player who suffered from childhood abuse-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Moore’s attorney’s argued the “GTA defense” -- that he lost touch with reality and was acting out the virtual violence in GTA. Despite his attorney’s efforts, the GTA defense was unsuccessful and Moore was sentenced to death in 2005 (“Can a video game lead to murder?,” 2005).
- **HEATHERS (1989)** – Film inspired 15-year old girl in Seattle to lace a peanut butter sandwich with poison intending to kill an 11-year old playmate (Surette, 1998).
- **HIT MAN: A TECHNICAL MANUAL FOR INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS (1983)**  
Book written under the pseudonym Rex Feral influenced a man who hired a professional hit man to murder his paraplegic son and ex-wife so he would obtain the insurance money. After the offender’s trial and conviction it was discovered that he had ordered and purchased a copy of the book *A Technical Manual for Independent Contractors*, a book that offered graphic instructions on how to murder someone. In court it was determined that the book was not protected speech because the publisher intended it as a how-to manual (O’Neil, 2001).
- **HORROR FILM GENRE** – relationship between horror films (in general) and specific serial murder or violent crime cases, including the case of Armin Meiwes the Germany cannibal killer “German cannibal tells of fantasy” (December 3, 2003).

- **ICE-T'S "COP KILLER" (1992)** – Music and lyrics accused of inciting violence against police and other crimes. In Virginia a record store owner was arrested for selling the album/CD *Body Count* on which the song appears. Many record stores reacted by removing the album from their stores (Surette, 1998).
- **IN COLD BLOOD (1967)** – Film version of the 1966 novel by Truman Capote is said to have influenced Jesse Carl McAllister age 21 and Bradley Charles Price age 22 in the execution style murder a young couple watching the sunset on a beach in Seaside, Oregon in 1997. McAllister and Price shot the couple in the head and then fled to Mexico.
- **JACK ASS (2002)** – a number of copycats of crimes (stolen golf carts) and stunts (jumping off buildings) occurred after release of the film (Coleman, 2004).
- **JACK THE RIPPER COPYCAT** – Derek Brown, a 47-year-old-father of seven, followed in the footsteps of Jack the Ripper before being caught and sentence to 30 years in prison. Despite either of the bodies being found, Brown was convicted of murdering two women in 2008, Xiao Mei guo (29 YO) and Bonnie Berrett (26 YO). Brown picked his victims from the Whitechapel area of East London, where Jack the Ripper had carried out his five murders 120 years prior. Police believe he chose the Whitechapel area so that he would be compared to Jack the Ripper and read up on local killers in a book containing information about the "Yorkshire Ripper" and other local "greats". Blood evidence was found throughout his home, with the highest concentration of blood stains found in the bathroom where the women were dismembered in the bathtub. Police believe he was on his way to becoming a serial killer, and after he was caught; they linked him to six unsolved sexual assaults. (Fresco, 2008)
- **JAMES BYRD MURDER (1998)** -- The brutal pick-up truck *dragging murder of James Byrd* in Jasper, Texas in 1998 was mimicked around the country within days of Byrd's murder. Separate cases in Illinois, Louisiana involved white men who dragged a black man while yelling racial slurs ("A Third Car Dragging Incident is Reported," 2001).
- **MAGNUM FORCE (1973)** – Film starring Clint Eastwood. Scene in film where a woman was killed by pouring Drain cleaner down her throat was modeled by murderers William Andrews and Dale Selby Pierre in what became known as the the 1974 Ogden Utah "Hi-Fi murders." The pair robbed a stereo store and during the robbery mimicked the scene in Magnum Force by forcing five victims to drink Drano before they shot them all in the head (Douglas & Olshaker, 1999). Two of the victims survived including then 16 year-old Cortney Naisbitt whose experience was depicted in the book Victim (Kinder, 1982).
- **MAPPELTHORPE (1946-1989)** – Photographer whose work was criticized for encouraging pedophilia and homosexual Sadomasochism.
- **MARILYN MANSON (1969-Present)** – Musician and pop culture icon. His music, style, artwork, and aesthetic has been linked to a number of crimes including the Columbine shootings and the 2003 murder of a 14 year-old girl in Scotland ("Jury shown Manson video," December 23, 2004, Poling, 2007). He's been accused of encouraging a cult-like following and many of his followers are said to be involved in deviant and criminal activity. He was recently featured in a TNT documentary called *Faces of Evil* in which people who "celebrate evil" were profiled (Moore, 2002).

- **MARQUI DE SADE** – De Sade’s writings have been associated with sadism, pornography, and sexual violence throughout history (Black, 1991; Danner, 1984) in particular in the writings of prominent feminist writers.
- **MENACE II SOCIETY (1993)** - Motivated two youths who killed and robbed a motorist and four teens to steal a car, wound a man, and kill another (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995).
- **MONEY TRAIN (1995)** - The film including a scene where a man douses a subway token booth with a flammable liquid, lights a match, and demands money. When the clerk inside tries to hand him a bag of cash, the man drops throws the match through the coin slot at the clerk saying that he isn’t in it for the money and sets the booth on fire. In the film, the clerk escapes before the booth explodes. Three days after the film opened, two Brooklyn men (19 year-old Thomas Malik and 18 year-old Vincent Ellerbe) squirted gasoline into a subway booth, setting 50 year-old clerk Harry Kaufman on fire. Kaufman subsequently died 2 weeks later after succumbing to burns over 80 percent of his body. In the two weeks following the film’s opening a total of eight such subway booth attacks occurred (Segal & Enos, 1991; Surette, 1998).
- **NATURAL BORN KILLERS (1994)** - linked to a dozen murders in the U.S, Canada, and Europe and to school shooter cases including Columbine. Three copycats involved male/female pairs who went on murder sprees including the 1995 robbery/murder spree of 18 year-old Benjamin Darras and Sarah Edmondson that led to a civil suit against NBK director Oliver Stone that went to the U.S. Supreme court before it was dismissed in 2001; Four murders committed by 19 year-old Florence Rey and 22 year-old boyfriend Audry Maupin dubbed “France’s Natural Born Killers”; and 1998 case involving Veronique Herbert and Sebastien Paindavoine who murdered a 16 year-old boy in a sex set-up right out of the film (O’Brien, 2001).
- **OLDBOY (2003)** – Korean revenge film said to have inspired Virginia Tech gunman Cho Seung-Hui who murdered 32 students and professors at Virginia Tech in April 2007. Seung-Hui mailed photos and a videotape of himself to NBC news where he posed with a gun to his head and holding a hammer similar to images in this film. Images were so similar to those in the film that a Virginia Tech film and video professor noted links and Cho was said to have watched the film many times (Coyle, 2007; Hendrix, 2007; Sragow, 2007).
- **SET IT OFF (1996)** – Film influenced a bank robbery in Aberdeen, Washington in the mid-1990s committed by a woman, her teenage daughter, and friend. The trio watched the film prior to the robbery and witnesses said they counted off exactly like the characters in the film (Segal & Enos, 1991).
- **ROBOCOP II (1990)** – Influenced Nathaniel White who committed multiple murders in New York. White said in police interview that he got the idea for how to commit the crime in the first of his six murders from a scene in the film (Segal & Enos, 1991).
- **SCREAM (1996)** – For three or four years after the movie *Scream* was released, a number of teenagers were inspired by the film to commit murder. A boy and his cousin in Los Angeles murdered the boy’s mother stabbing her 45 times. 14 year-old Daniel Gill and 15 year-old Robert Fuller watched *Scream* at the home of their drug dealer and then attempted to murder their friend Ashley Murrey stabbing him 18 times. The boys indicated that the film may have influenced their behavior (Ramsland, 2013).
- **SEVEN (1995)** – Andrea Yates is said to have watched this film in the week before she murdered her five children by drowning in Texas in 2001. (Denno, 2003; Sweetingham, 2006)

- **SOPRANOS (1999-2006)** - In Riverside California in 2003, two brothers strangled their 41 year-old mother and then chopped off her head and hands to hide her identity (storing her head and hands in their bedroom in the family's apartment). The two, Jason Bautista a 20 year-old California State University biochemistry major and his 15 year-old half-brother told investigators they'd gotten the idea for the dismemberment to foil identification of the body on an episode of the television show *The Sopranos* (Segal & Enos, 1991).
- **SLAYER (1983-Present)** – Heavy metal band whose music is said to have influence three teenage boys to murder a 10<sup>th</sup> grade girl in California in 2001. All three boys were said to be devotees of the band and in court one of the boys said Slayer's music influenced the way he looked at things (O'Neil, 2001).
- **STARSKY & HUTCH (1970s)** – TV series allegedly motivated a boy in Canada to extort 50,000 from a local mayor (Surette, 1998).
- **TAXI DRIVER (1976)** – John Hinckley's 1981 assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan was associated with the film. Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity after his attorneys argued he was fixated on the film, its characters, and actors (Jodi Foster), and that his obsession with the film was evidence that he had lost the distinction between reality and fiction. Hinckley was said to have used *Taxi Driver* as a primary script and John Lennon's murder by Mark David Chapman as a secondary script in his assassination attempt. The film was played for jurors at his trial (Black, 1991; Low, Jeffries, & Bonnie, 1986).
- **THE BURNING BED (1984)** - after viewing this TV movie a man poured gasoline on his wife and said he was trying to frighten her. There have also been a number of similar crimes, though it is unclear if the perpetrators saw the movie.
- **THE DARK KNIGHT (2008)** -- Two teens, Justin Colby Dirico and Bryan Eugene Stafford, both 18 were charged with conspiracy to commit and act of terrorism for leaving defaced playing cards around local stores. The boys admitted to police that the prank was inspired by the character "The Joker" from the Batman movie *The Dark Knight*. The cards had "JOKER" written across them and left within the stores to be found and scare the inhabitants of the store. (Harvey, 2008)
- **THE DARK KNIGHT RISES (2012)** – A gas masked 24-Year old gunman James Holmes opened fire at a Colorado movie theatre during the Friday screening of the movie *The Dark Knight Rises* killing 12 people and wounding 70 (Lin II, 2012; The Associated Press, 2013). One week later, 37-Year old Scott Smith near Cleveland Ohio was arrested after entering a Regal Cinema movie theatre after purchasing a ticket to *The Dark Knight Rises*. He was noticed and confronted in his seat by an undercover police officer. Police found a 9mm Glock and ammunition in his bag (Gorman, 2012).
- **THE GIFT (1998)** – Japanese TV show that depicted characters carrying butterfly knives. The show is claimed to have inspired a 13 year-old boy to stab his teacher to death with a butterfly knife. Two years later this alleged copycat murder fueled fire over the film *Battle Royale*, an extremely violent film involving teenagers who are forced to kill each other on an island until the last (or best) is standing (Sparks & Sparks, 2002).
- **THE LAST SEDUCTION (1994)** – Prosecutors in the Michele Linehan murder trial argued that Linehan, a former Alaskan exotic dancer turned Olympia, Washington soccer mom, was

influenced by the film to conspire with her then boyfriend John Carlin, III to kill her ex-fiance Kent Leppink in a 1996 murder-for-insurance plot. Prosecutors argued that Linehan committed the crime after viewing the film and used her sexuality to manipulate men, just like the film's main character played by Linda Fiorentino. Linehan, who in the 11 years since the crime married a doctor and had a daughter, was convicted of first-degree murder on October 23, 2007 (Holland, October 5, 2007; Holland, October 22, 2007)

- **THE MATRIX (1999, 2003)** - Associated with a half a dozen murders. In several of the offenders' trials (including D.C. Sniper shooter John Malvo), the Matrix was woven into the defendant's insanity defense. In at least two cases (Lynne Ansley in Ohio in 2002 and Vadim Miesegees San Francisco in 2003) the "matrix defense" resulted in a finding of not guilty by reason of insanity. (Coleman, 2004; Stern, 2003).
- **THE SECRET AGENT (1907)** – Federal authorities believe Ted Kaczynski a.k.a "The Unabomber" was influenced by this novel written by Joseph Conrad. Kaczynski, a former Math professor, was a fan of author Joseph Conrad and was believed to have read the book a dozen times before committing his crimes (Kovaleski, 1996).
- **THELMA & LOUISE (1991)** – Film said to have influenced a number of female pairs to commit a variety of crimes including bank robbery (Segal & Enos, 1991).
- **TV NEWS** - has been said to motivate copy-cat terrorist activities (Surette, 1998).
- **TV PRISON MOVIES** - motivated several girls in California to rape a 9-year old girl after watching a movie about a girl who was raped in a juvenile institution (Surette, 1988).
- **TV WRESTLING (1999)** – In 1999 12 year-old Lionel Tate said he was mimicking wrestling moves he saw on TV when he murdered his 6 year-old playmate ("Lionel Tate released," 2004).
- **TYLENOL POISONINGS (1980s and 1990s)** -- In 1982 the parents of a 12 year-old Illinois girl complaining of a sore throat and runny nose gave her one extra-strength Tylenol capsule. Within an hour the girl was found lying on the bathroom floor and was rushed to the hospital where she later died. That same day in a nearby Illinois suburb, a 27 year-old postal worker died from an unexplained heart attack. On the night of his death, his brother and sister-in-law took Tylenol they found at his home and collapsed and died shortly after. It was eventually discovered by the Cook County Medical Examiner's Office that all four had died as a result of cyanide poisoning and that the Tylenol capsules were filled with 65 milligrams of cyanide – 10,000 times more than the amount needed to kill a person. Before the word got out and the Tylenol recalled, three more deaths occurred in Illinois. From the first mention of the Tylenol murders, copycat tamperings occurred. The FDA identified 270 incidents, 36 of which were labeled hard core true tamperings. In the late 1980s and early 1990s there were copycat tampering murders in New York and in Washington State involving Tylenol, Excedrin, and Sudafed. Perpetrators were arrested in many of the tamperings that resulted in murders, including the arrest of Stella Nickell who murdered her husband and another woman in Washington State. Nickells had wanted to make her husband's murder look like a serial tampering homicide. Police identified Nickells after finding prints on a library book she had checked out called Deadly Harvest, specifically on pages dealing with cyanide poisoning. To date the original Tylenol terrorist has never been caught (Bell, 2005).
- **V FOR VENDETTA** -- On 14 December 2010 Clay Duke, a 56 year old man, briefly addressed the Panama City School Board about the firing of his wife before spray painting a large, red "V" on a wall encompassed by a large circle. Duke then drew a concealed handgun from his person

ordered all the women and children out of the boardroom and took the 6 male board members hostage. After questioning the board and exchanging dialogue for several minutes Duke open fired on the board members, missing everyone, at which point SWAT and a security guard breached the room and took down the crazed man. Duke identified with the main character, "V", from the movie *V For Vendetta* who is portrayed as a "monster" fighting for what is "right" against "tyranny"; this the mindset it seems Duke adopted. Duke's inspiration from and obsession with the movie could be found at various locations around his facebook page, along with his various rants that he posted there.(Dougherty, 2010)

- **WARRIORS (1979)** - film about a Coney island gang that was the subject of a 1989 liability suit. The case was brought by the parents of a teenager who was stabbed to death on a subway car by an offender who had just seen the film which depicted a similar murder.
- **ZODIAC KILLER COPYCAT --** In the late 1960s in the San Francisco area, over a five year period the Zodiac Killer killed at least seven individuals with a knife and a pistol and taunted the police with cryptic letters; he was never identified. Twenty years later, a Zodiac copycat Eddie Seda began his own murder spree in New York City, murdering victims based on their Zodiac sign using a knife and a homemade pistol. Seda sent cryptic letters to the police and carried out the murders in this fashion in hopes to create the illusion of the Zodiac Killer having returned, which he admitted in his confession to police. Heriberto "Eddie" Seda began his copycat spree in November 1989 and over the course of the next three years, Seda murdered three New Yorkers and attempted to kill five more. He was sentenced to 238 years in prison. (Haynes, 2009)

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> For example, after viewing the prosocial film *The Hundred Foot Journey*, in which a young aspiring chef is challenged by a well-to-do French restaurant owner to create an omelet that would show his talents, I found myself the next day showing my daughter how to cook an omelet when I have no history or regular habit of cooking omelets or giving my daughter cooking lessons.

<sup>2</sup> Although both of these potentially prosocial and crime prevention programs have also been criticized for creating moral panic. For example America's Most Wanted has been likened to television crime dramas that resemble urban legend that justifies public surveillance (Cavender & Bond-Maupin (1993) and AMBER Alert has been similarly referred to as "crime control theatre" (Griffin & Miller, 2008)

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps one of the best recent examples of this convergence of influences is the BTK killer, Dennis Rader. Here is someone who tortured and murdered 10 people over a 30 year period, all the while watching his own crimes in the media. Driven by deviant sexual fantasy, sadism, psychopathy, and narcissism ... and some might say the cultural lore of the brilliant serial killer, he followed his own crimes in the news, studied criminal justice to stay a step ahead of investigators, and was caught only because he decided to contact the media himself because there was too long of a lull in media attention to his crimes. Even at his sentencing where he received 10 consecutive life sentences, he gave a 30 minute speech that sounded like an acceptance speech for an academy award.

<sup>4</sup> There have been a large number of studies that have produced findings directly counter to the catharsis hypothesis which has resulted in a "virtual abandonment" (Sparks & Sparks, 2002, p. 278) of the catharsis theory by the research community. However, most of these studies have been laboratory studies focusing on aggression in children (as opposed to juvenile or adult criminal behavior) in response to viewing a violent TV or film. Research involving virtual violence and catharsis (in particular with 1<sup>st</sup> person shooter games) is just beginning to be explored.

<sup>5</sup> A case in point, in 1988 James Wilson of Greenwood, South Carolina went on a shooting spree in an elementary school. Police discovered in his room a photo of the People magazine cover of his hero Laurie Dann who several months earlier had committed a similar crime a few months before in Winnetka, Illinois. These shootings were said to have inspired a string of copycat mass killings in the early 1990s (Fox & Levin, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> In videotaped interviews with police (*State of Washington v. Ridgway*, 2004), Gary Ridgeway mentions having followed other serial killers in the media such as Ted Bundy. Dennis Rader specifically mentions the Green River Killer and Son of Sam in interviews regarding how he embraced the acronym BTK because it was like the "Green River Killer" and "Son of Sam..." ("Secret confessions of BTK, August 12, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Marx (1995) offers examples such as Sting's song "Every breath you take," the Santa Christmas song "He knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake..." Meloy (1998) suggests that films such as *Fatal Attraction*, *Play Misty for Me*, the *Charlie Brown* comic where Sally is always following Linus, the perfume *Obsession*, etc. offer cultural support for stalking as the "dark heart of the romantic pursuit" (p. 6). Other examples of pop cultural images of surveillance and stalking include the films *Sliver*, *Taxi Driver*, and *The Fan*.

<sup>8</sup> The paparrazis who pursued Princess Diana when she died in the fatal car accident in 1997 have been referred to as "stalkerazzis" for engaging in a car chase to take photos of her and then continuing to snap photos of her and her companions after they were injured and near death inside of their severely damaged car (Meloy, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Early research assumptions suggested that the majority of stalkers suffered from Delusional Disorders, in particular the erotomanic subtype. However, recent research indicates that this is an unlikely primary diagnosis among stalkers (Meloy, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Rey, a.k.a. "The David Letterman Stalker," was mentally ill, served time in a mental institution as a result of convictions for trespassing on Letterman's property, and committed suicide at age 46 in Colorado in 1998 by kneeling in front of a train.

<sup>11</sup> The scene involved Mallory Knox engaging in sexual relations with a teenage gas station attendant, becoming enraged during the sex act, and then shooting him.



<sup>12</sup> At numerous points throughout the film, Mallory Knox (played by Juliet Lewis) lashes out at men who sexualize and mock her by shooting them dead while hollering phrases such as, “How sexy am I now flirty boy?”

<sup>13</sup> An example of a copycat loop is the scene in the film *Natural Born Killers* where Mickey Knox (played by Woody Harrelson) asks reporter Wayne Gayle (played by Robert Downey Jr.), if coverage of his murderous rampage would get higher ratings than Ted Bundy or Charles Manson, suggesting that he admired and may have been emulating these murderers in his own crimes. Another example is the detective, Jack Scagnetti (played by Tom Sizemore) who claims that his mother was a victim of the (real-life) Charles Whitman mass murder who is depicted as sexually aroused by Mallory and eventually mimics the couple’s behavior by murdering a prostitute in his hotel room.

<sup>14</sup> Other films that have depicted (some more loosely than others) the Starkweather/Fugate murder spree include the 1963 film, *The Sadist*, the 1974 film *Badlands*, and the 1993 films *Kalifornia* and *True Romance*, and the 2004 film *Starkweather*. See Sargeant’s (1996) *Born Bad: The Story of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate* for an overview of the Starkweather/Fugate murders and the cultural impact of their story.

<sup>15</sup> Several weeks following its release, Republican Senator (and 1996 Presidential candidate) Bob Dole broadcast nationally his views about the film when he implied, in a speech about the impact of Hollywood violence on the American family, that it (and another film, *True Romance*) should be banned. The film was banned in Ireland, its release was delayed in Britain, and it was a box-office smash in America.

<sup>16</sup> Axis I mental disorders are not in and of themselves criminogenic factors. However, Axis I disorders appear to play a role in the commission of some types of criminal behavior for some individuals and are an important consideration with respect to the manifestation of copycat crime.

<sup>17</sup> Hummer et al (2010) specifically found that the activity of the prefrontal cortical areas involved in inhibiting cognitive and motor performance was diminished in teenagers following play of a violent video game (*Medal of Honor* – a first-person shooter game) as compared to teens who played a non-violent video game (*Need for Speed* – a first-person racing game) for 30 minutes.

<sup>18</sup> Shafer (2009) is a methodologically creative doctoral dissertation that introduced a new scale for measuring media moral disengagement tendency (MMDT) – an innovative and much needed tool to measure the interaction between individual-level factors and the characteristics of media sources.

<sup>19</sup> The Violence Inhibition Mechanism (VIM) refers to the process by which humans and other social animals such as monkeys and rats are inhibited from engaging in violent acts of harm upon observation of distress cues exhibited by their potential victims. In other words, when social animals see distress cues such as sad and fearful expressions the result is increased autonomic activity, attention, and activation of the brainstem response system which usually results in freezing. Research suggests that the VIM helps explain in part the instrumental/predatory aggression committed by individuals with psychopathy (Blair, Mitchell, & Blair, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> The story of the Hi-Fi murder case have been described in detail in books and a TV movie including Kinder’s (1982) *Victim: The Other Side of Murder* which was made into a TV movie in 1991 called *Aftermath: A Test of Love*, Douglas et als. (1992) *Crime Classification Manual*, and Douglas & Olshaker’s (1999) *Anatomy of Motive*. Kinder’s book details the aftermath of the crime for the most severely wounded living victim, 16 year-old Cortney Naisbitt. Naisbitt was shot in the head and paralyzed and debilitated for the rest of his life. He died in 2002 at age 44 in Seattle, Washington from an undisclosed illness. Selby and Andrews were sentenced to death and were executed in 1987 and 1992 respectively. Incidentally Andrews was executed after being the longest person to have served on death row.

<sup>21</sup> Copycat crime might best be viewed as a supertype of criminal behavior that dictates the nature of some offenses.

Figure 1. Factors that Influence Copycat Crime

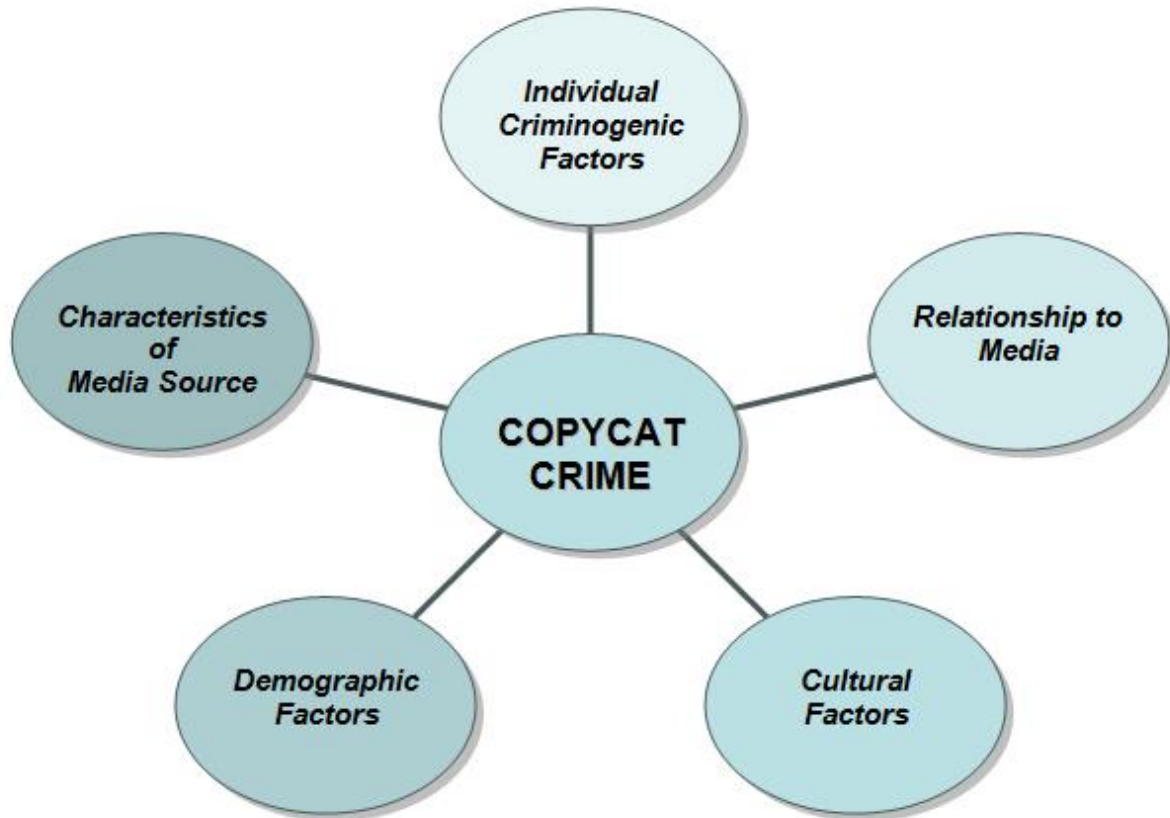
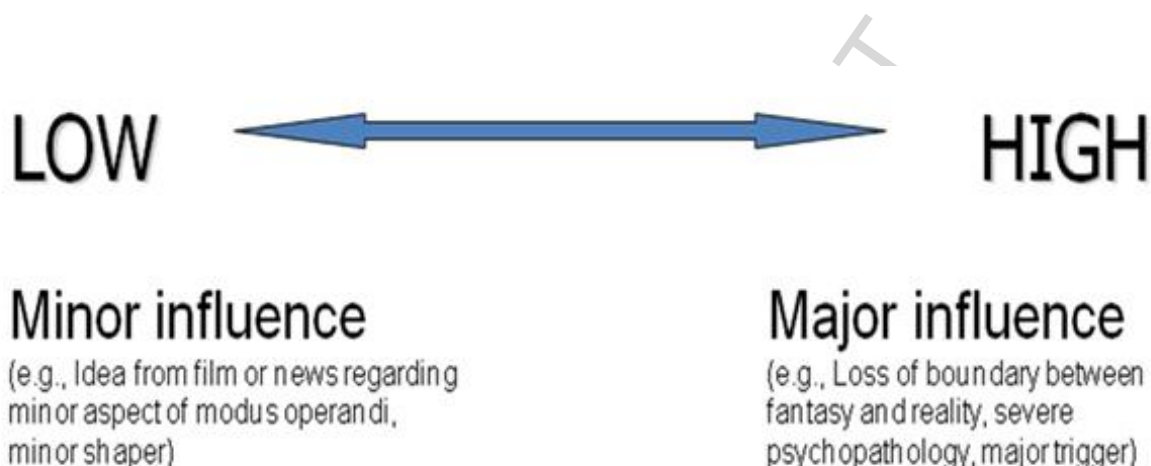


Figure 2. Continuum of Influence of Media and Popular Culture on Criminal Behavior



<sup>1</sup> For example, after viewing the prosocial film *The Hundred Foot Journey*, in which a young aspiring chef is challenged by a well-to-do French restaurant owner to create an omelette that would show his talents, I found myself the next day showing my daughter how to cook an omelette when I have no history or regular habit of cooking omelettes or giving my daughter cooking lessons.

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## Highlights

- This paper reviews the research literature and contemporary case examples of copycat crime with attention to the influence of mass media technology on criminal behavior, the mechanisms of media-mediated crime, and the relevance of understanding the copycat phenomenon.
- There is a growing body of anecdotal evidence suggesting that copycat crime is a very real phenomenon exacerbated by the central role played by media and popular culture in particular in the lives of youth.
- Development of an empirical framework for examining copycat crime and identification of risk factors for the copycat effect on criminal behavior requires interdisciplinary integration and attention to the complex interplay of individual, environmental, situational, and media-related factors.
- The copycat effect can be best understood along a continuum of influence.
- Mass media technology shapes offender modus operandi, exacerbates some types of offenses, and creates entirely new motivational influences and categories of criminal behavior.
- As media and computer technology continue to rapidly advance and an increasingly central role in people's lives, the greater the importance of developing theory and conducting empirical research on the relationship between mass media technology and criminal behavior.